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Yotsugi Buddy

001

Thinking about it, it had been quite a while since I'd come to know Ononoki Yotsugi. When I met that cute corpse doll for the first time, I had no idea that I would end up in this complicated relationship with her… And though I said "relationship", I couldn't find the words in my vocabulary that could perfectly describe my relationship with that tsukumogami.

Friends? Enemies? Observer and observed?

Perpetrator? Victim? Third party? Supporter?

Partner? Housemate? Stakeholder?

Witness? Lawyer? Executioner?

All of these seemed to be blatantly true. In fact, there had actually been times where I had declared as such. But the moment I said it out loud, it would feel like I was sliding off again in the wrong direction.

Expressionless and monotonous.

I had no idea what she was thinking.

What she thought, what she felt, what she did, all of it was utterly inscrutable.

Senjougahara Hitagi was my girlfriend.

Hanekawa Tsubasa was my benefactor, and Hachikuji Mayoi was my friend.

Kanbaru Suruga was my junior, and Sengoku Nadeko was an old acquaintance.

Oshino Shinobu was my partner, and Oshino Ougi was my alter ego.

Oikura Sodachi was my childhood friend, and Hamukai Meniko was my close friend.

Araragi Karen was family, and Araragi Tsukihi was family.

Then, who was Ononoki Yotsugi?

What was between me and her?

However, worrying about it like that was a waste of time… You could even say it was stalling for time. Even if I'd once been immortal for a mere two weeks, why did I need to attach a fitting label onto my relationship with Ononoki Yotsugi? Names were something you gave to identify things and make things easier to refer to.

But as long as the relationship between a former vampire and a shikigami zombie didn't exist anywhere else, the relationship between me and her could just be—"us".

Until the day our long relationship becomes a long farewell.

002

"I'm abusing my three-year-old daughter. I just can't seem to bring myself to think of her as cute, so I can't raise her properly. Please, will you save me? Araragi-kun."

When Associate Professor Iesumi consulted me in such a way, my honest thought was, "I'm the one who wants saving here"—at the very least, I couldn't respond with something pretentious like, "People can only be saved on their own".

We were in a building at Manase University.

When I was summoned by email to the office of Associate Professor Iesumi, who was in charge of teaching Swiss German, I thought I was going to receive a stern lecture about the first midterm exam I had taken the other day—to put it bluntly, I thought I would receive a notice about a makeup exam or something before my first exciting university summer vacation. After all, I wasn't exactly a capable student.

I'd always had a problem with being a student.

It was like I wasn't equipped with learning functions.

Preparing myself for the possibility that I'd have to call off my Hokkaido crab-eating trip that I had planned to take with my girlfriend, Senjougahara Hitagi—for the first time since I entered the university, I nervously stepped into her office… Mm, I thought it would be like being summoned to a high school staff room, but it was more like a guidance counselor's office. As a professional of being called to the staff room in high school, I was well-versed in the subtle nuances of these matters.

I was the often-called-out Araragi.

In other words, the often-called-out Araragi was only familiar with things like the staff room, the guidance counselor's office, the mysterious classroom that shouldn't exist, and the girls' locker room—he most certainly wasn't familiar with child abuse.

I was kidding about the girls' locker room. For the record.

If I had to say it, then this consultation, if true, was something that should quite literally be brought to a children's welfare center—so why was Associate Professor Iesumi confessing such a private matter to me, just one student, who you could even call a zero student? Even though he was now a university student, Araragi-kun himself was still a child mentally… Should I confess on my end that I'm into roleplaying as a baby with my girlfriend?

I wasn't kidding about the baby roleplaying. For the record.

"Ah,"

said Associate Professor Iesumi, as if concerned for me, who'd

been left rather confused.

"My words may have come off a bit too strong. In that respect, I'm not very good with the nuances of Japanese… Let me correct myself. I can't bring myself to think of my three-year-old daughter as cute, so I feel like I'm about to abuse her."

Save me, Araragi-kun.

That was what she said—but even if she said that.

According to the handbook I used as a reference when choosing my classes, Associate Professor Iesumi's full name was Iesumi Hagoromo, and she was born and raised in Switzerland—to tell you the truth, I only took this class to match with my new university friend, Hamukai Meniko, and, as an unenlightened fellow, I hadn't known until I took the course that there were four languages spoken simultaneously in Switzerland.

Four? Really?

Naturally, among those four, the Japanese language wasn't included… To Associate Professor Iesumi, who moved to Japan when she got married, Japanese was, in the end, still a foreign language.

Well, the nuance certainly did change when she corrected herself… But my impressions hadn't changed.

My feelings and thoughts hadn't wavered.

I was the one who wanted saving here.

Er, I didn't mean in the sense of "please give me credits so I can play with my girlfriend during summer vacation".

A three-year-old daughter…?

It was the first time I'd heard that she had a daughter.

Honestly, she didn't look like she would have a child at all. I had only gotten the impression that she was the intellectual type, a young university professor—if I had to guess, I would say that I vaguely thought that she must be a nice person because she had the kanji for "*hane*" in her name[1] (that's enough of that, me!), but I didn't think that she was the "mother" type.

Mother…

Well, that was just my bias, I suppose. "Motherliness", or motherhood, was really an old-fashioned imposition… Considering my own mother. However, when I was in high school, I'd had quite a few opportunities to interact with adults who were lax, self-defeating, and not fully grown up. Based on those experiences, I would say that Associate Professor Iesumi seemed to be a "decent person".

The email she had sent me had been rather polite, and she even offered me a cup of coffee when I arrived… At least, she didn't look like someone who would abuse her own daughter.

Was it that people weren't always what they seemed?

I'd heard so many stories about husbands that were violent at

home who acted like reputable fathers on the outside—it was disgusting, truly disgusting…

"Should I be more specific? Should I go into the details? You seem like a specialist, Araragi-kun, so I figured this would be enough… It's not exactly something I'm willing to talk about, either."

"A—a specialist?"

I flinched.

To me, that term was something that applied to the lax, self-defeating, and not fully grown-up adults that I had just recalled… Though I hadn't necessarily been proactive about it, I used to help them with their work when I was in high school.

No, that wasn't just in the past tense. I'd been helping them out even in university, too. Had I been found out? If that was the case, it wasn't exactly something I wanted—I'd panicked for a moment, but it didn't seem like that was the kind of "specialist" Associate Professor Iesumi was talking about.

Basically, I should have been panicking even more.

"Araragi-kun, I heard you were a specialist of child abuse… That's what Oikura-san told me. It's true, right?"

I had shuddered from the bottom of my heart, worried that she had somehow discovered the golden-haired loli slave in my shadow, but that wasn't it, either… Apparently, Associate Professor Iesumi had heard about my extracurricular activities in high school from my beloved childhood friend, the lovely Oikura Sodachi-chan.

At this point, there were enough mistakes to create a spot-the-mistakes puzzle.

Since we had casually cut ties at present, I hadn't seen the face of that fiendish girl for a while now, but apparently, Oikura had come into contact with Associate Professor Iesumi in another class… Was it Swiss Italian, Swiss German, or even Romansh? It wasn't like she knew anything about loli slaves or other oddities, so I was sure she was just saying bad things about me to Associate Professor Iesumi in the same way she always did to everyone she met, in a rather distorted and brazenly untrue way—but from there, it finally became clear to me, just a little bit. Really, it was just a little…

A specialist of child abuse.

I was very reluctant to be crowned with such a title, but it was true that I'd often witnessed such scenes in the past… In particular, I had to say that my senior year of high school had been quite eventful.

Hanekawa Tsubasa, who'd practically been abandoned after being tossed around. Senjougahara Hitagi, who was a fathercon who'd messed up her relationship with her mother. Hachikuji Mayoi, who'd gotten lost forever on her way to see her divorced mother without telling her father. Kanbaru Suruga, who was still chasing after—still taking responsibility for—her mother's "legacy" after her death. Sengoku Nadeko, who'd been overly pampered and spoiled. And, of course, it was difficult to say that Associate Professor Iesumi's source of information, Oikura Sodachi, whose reason for living was to hate me like a scorpion, had been nurtured in a wholesome and faultless manner.

And, well, there were a few other cases.

Too many to count.

I myself hadn't always maintained a good relationship with my parents—in fact, for a while, things had been seriously tense.

I can admit now, without being stubborn, that if it hadn't been for my two younger sisters, I might have left home before I graduated from high school… And that delinquent son (me) was now a college student still living with his parents, so the world is truly a complex and bizarre place.

Going back to the main topic. In that sense, it was quite

accurate to describe me as a specialist of child abuse. It felt like she'd hit me in my weak point. However, even taking that into account, I felt like I had to tell Associate Professor Iesumi that she was consulting the wrong person.

After all, while I may have witnessed a lot of child abuse, it wasn't as if I'd resolved them all one after another—though I may have stirred the pot, there was not a single case that I could have resolved.

Instead of the Extraordinary Zorro, I was Resolutions: Zero.[2]

See? I'm a zero that can say such unfunny things without batting an eye… A zero student. In the first place, with regards to Associate Professor Iesumi's source of information, my sweetheart Oikura—her case was the family situation that I'd been the most incapable of solving.

She was a real piece of work, that childhood friend of mine.

Making a career out of spreading urban legends about me, whether they were true or not… Don't badmouth me to a professor. It's that kind of thing about you—oh well, I'll take my frustrations out on my sweetheart over some *okonomiyaki* at her lodgings. Although we'd cut ties.

Right now, there was a professor in front of me.

Mm, this was a problem.

It was true that, for argument's sake, I was pretty well-versed in these sorts of things for a nineteen-year-old, but since I was a child myself (and still am), I had always been involved in those horrific scenes from the perspective of the abused children.

Even with the incident with Benikujaku-chan the other day.

So I never thought I'd be consulted by the abusive parent herself… What could I say? To be honest, I was avoiding looking at things directly. So far, I'd only ever thought of abusive parents—the perpetrators—as a mere concept—but that was a scant difference from only being able to see a mother as nothing but a "mom".

They weren't concepts, they were people. They weren't even oddities.

They were living people. Hard as it was to believe.

Perhaps it was time for me to face the truth that, whether it was the case of Oikura or the case of Hitagi or the case of Hanekawa, people were abused by other people.

I'd already figured that one thing out.

I learned it pretty early.

But meeting the parent herself face-to-face like this, it was actually pretty hard to come up with any words of criticism or lines of condemnation—of course, the strong word "abuse" brought up a lot of animosity, but I wasn't able to express those feelings properly.

It would be pretty shameful if I were a performer.

But I couldn't respond quickly. That was partially because I didn't know the details yet, but also because it was difficult to interfere in other people's family matters. In Benikujaku-chan's case, there had been no room for hesitation, and no room to make a decision, and the result of such a reflexive move was that we just barely made it in time—just barely in time, not just thanks to my intervention but also divine intervention.

The problem was also that she was a university professor, and I was her student who'd been taking her lecture for three months, so that power dynamic was something to keep in mind… Was it called the normalcy bias? I also couldn't deny that I was trying to maintain a sense of normalcy, giving her the consideration that "there may be some unavoidable circumstances" or "she's just exaggerating and being self-deprecating".

Her hairstyle and her clothes, as well as the interior of the office, were all fairly clean, so she certainly didn't seem like a wicked person… Based on her rational behavior, she didn't seem like the greatest villain of the century. Or did that simply mean that I'd grown up, even though I was still acting like a child? If I were still a high school third-year, would I have kicked the table and left the room as soon as I heard the phrase, "abusing my three-year-old daughter"?

A three-year-old-daughter, huh…

I suddenly started to examine myself.

Even before I was a high school third-year, I had a bad (or even heinous) habit of only being able to see what was right in front of me, whether it was reality or illusion–right now, I needed to not only think about the university professor right in front of me, but also about her "three-year-old daughter".

Just as an abusive parent was not just a concept, an abused daughter was also not just a concept—she was solidly real.

A specialist—one specialist of oddities had had the slogan "people can only save themselves", but how should that be applied when there were two people to save?

"Araragi-kun, about that… What do you think?"

"…? What do you mean by 'that'?"

When I returned the vague question asked by Associate Professor Iesumi in order to fill the slightly (or perhaps more than slightly) awkward silence, she said,

"What do you think about the theory that abused children will become parents who abuse their own children?"

She added on.

Ah… "That", huh.

"Well, I didn't exactly grow up in a happy family, and to tell

you the truth, I got married and came to Japan in order to escape my family… It's something that's hard to immediately deny if I'm accused of it, but I don't like being told that my only characteristic is that I didn't have a happy childhood… It makes me sick to think that my life is still under the influence of those parents… It's extremely vexing… On the other hand, when I'm tired of being selfish, I want to end up leaning on such a theory, so is this perhaps just me immaturely blaming my parents for my own inadequacies?"

What a difficult question.

I'd certainly heard the theory before… Thinking about it now, it's interesting that that class representative, who fell under the spell of a cat after being subjected to violence by her father, was still pro-corporal punishment in spite of being such a serious and conscientious human rights advocate.

Thinking about it really hard, I'd come to the conclusion that Associate Professor Iesumi Hagoromo was a good person because of the kanji for "*hane*" in her name, but the surname of the person who hit Hanekawa was also "Hanekawa"…

To tell you the truth, I wanted to respond with a straightforward argument that there were many parents who grew up with abuse that didn't go on to abuse their own children, but it wasn't like I'd actually met or talked to any of those parents… I felt like, for this specific situation where the person concerned was right in front of me, it wasn't quite fair to bring up the mere concept of "respectable people" as a model.

After all, saying something like, "There are people who can do it right, so why can't you do it right?"—those words were practically the same as the words that had once made me want to die.

"Well… If you're a parent who has a good relationship with your own parents, you'd probably get a reasonable amount of help raising your child, so you'd simply have an advantage over parents who can't ask for help, wouldn't you?"

"That's a specialist for you."

To my theoretical answer, which I had strained to come up with, Associate Professor Iesumi nodded her head—but, really, I'm not a specialist at all.

That was just superficial knowledge.

"A child is a handful, and yet there aren't enough hands to take care of her… Especially now, since I'm separated."

"Separated…?"

"Things just weren't going well with my husband… I suppose you could say we're out of touch. You could say that the cause was that I couldn't bring myself to love my child."

They say that children hold marriages together, but perhaps

there were opposite cases as well. Well, of course there would be… However, the keyword “separated” raised two questions.

The first was a question of her citizenship.

From what I’d heard, Associate Professor Iesumi, who was apparently born in Switzerland and was a Swiss citizen, obtained her residency status by marrying a Japanese citizen… If it came to the point that she were to officially divorce her estranged husband, what would happen?

Would it still be possible to keep her residency status even after divorcing? Though I’d heard that you could keep your family name at the time of divorce, if you wanted to.

No, it was because my brain was still a child’s that I immediately associated the word “separated” with divorce, but there were many circumstances in the world of marriage… She could be separated because her husband had been transferred for work, right?

And sometimes it was necessary to keep one’s distance in order to maintain a relationship, just like me and Oikura (with whom I’d currently cut ties).

However, if we pile hypothesis upon hypothesis, as though building a roof on top of another roof, then if Associate Professor Iesumi were to divorce… If that were to happen, and she had to go back to Switzerland regardless of her citizenship or residency status, would it be possible that she would be reunited with her parents, whom she thought she’d gotten away from?

Was that why Associate Professor Iesumi was asking me for advice… Well, that was just the incomprehensible suspicion of a lowlife.

To think that, in order to avoid meeting her parents, she was trying to solve her own abuse problem to avoid divorce—at the very least, I wanted her motive to be out of worry for her three-year-old daughter.

Well, let’s go with that. That should be good.

The mindset of a criminal wanting to be stopped before they committed an even bigger crime was a common one, without even needing to look up a social awareness mystery novel—even the advance notice that a phantom thief sends out can be interpreted as a sufferer of kleptomania asking for help from the police.

The case where you should stop and you want to stop, but you can’t. I’d also had a fair amount of trouble stopping myself from playing with the ribs of my golden-haired loli slave—I’d managed to stop when it led to discussing breaking up with my girlfriend. I’d stopped, but not because I’d wanted to—I only stopped because I’d been forced into an untenable situation where I had no choice but to stop.

If that same mindset—though it was a bit imprudent to compare those mindsets—was currently what that university professor had, then it would be unreasonable for me to blame her for it.

She asked me for advice with the same serious and dignified expression that she wore in class, so I couldn't quite read her inner thoughts… But let's just believe that Associate Professor Iesumi was serious about asking for help.

However, that was from a more long-term perspective.

The second question that arose from the word "separated" was a more short-term perspective—it could be said that this was only the perspective of someone like me, who could only see what was right in front of me, but whatever the reason, Associate Professor Iesumi said that she was separated from her husband.

Then, right now.

Currently, at this time, at this very moment—where exactly was Associate Professor Iesumi's "three-year-old" daughter?

If her husband wasn't at home taking care of her… A babysitter…? No, no, she can't have hired one, considering her earlier words. She'd said that there weren't enough hands to take care of her… Then, nursery school? Would Associate Professor Iesumi, who had half-admitted to abusing her child, go through what I'd heard was an extremely difficult process to leave her child at a nursery school?

"That's exactly it. That was the specific request I had for you. You sure are quick on the uptake. It really does feel like I've come to a specialist for advice. So Oikura-san, who introduced you to me, wasn't crazy after all."

I wanted to tell her that there was nothing but madness in that girl's eyes, but I found myself staying silent, beset by an ominous premonition that rivaled that of a con man.

"Lately, I've been so busy grading exams. In fact, I haven't been back to my apartment for the past three days."

"Th—three days?"

"So, after locking her in a cage in her room, I haven't the slightest idea how things are anymore… I'll give you the key, Araragi-kun, so can you go and check on her for me?"

Rather than specific.

It was an incredibly incomprehensible request.

"Uh-huh. I see. Basically, *oni* onii-chan, or for short, *oni*i-chan, in order to receive extra credit for the midterm exam you failed, you ended up taking on a job as the professor's babysitter during summer break."

"It should've gotten through to you that this isn't such an easygoing project!"

It wasn't a project to make fun of.

It wasn't even a project.

Or rather, the biggest mystery was why Ononoki-chan was gracefully lying on the back seat of my car, a Volkswagen New Beetle —as I was rushing from one of Manase University's parking lots towards the apartment that Associate Professor Iesumi had told me about, she'd suddenly said to me, "Speeding is bad, *oni* onii-chan," as if it were completely natural.

And why was it that she was wearing something as cheeky as a maxi dress that showed off her body line, instead of her usual draped skirt?… My car doesn't have a dress code, you know?

"Your sister forced me to wear this. That girl thinks I'm some sort of dress-up doll or something. At that point, I didn't know what I'd be forced to wear next, so last night I evacuated like it was an emergency, escaped to this car, and spent the night."

"Don't use my car as a panic room."

"Your parents bought this car for you, didn't they? You spoiled brat."

Ononoki-chan spoke with her usual expressionless monotone, rolling over in her seat—she'd turned her back to the driver's seat, but as far as I could see in the rearview mirror, her dress was so open-backed that her shoulder blades were clearly visible.

What was my (smaller) little sister making the doll of a tween girl wear? Don't raise Ononoki-chan's level of exposure.

That body is all dead flesh, you know?

Anyway, it seemed that Ononoki-chan had already been rolling around in the back seat of my car when I'd left my house for the university—because she was a doll, and a corpse doll at that, she was a master at hiding her presence.

And after that, she'd spent the entire day in the car… With the season being what it was, a living person would have gotten heatstroke. If she'd wanted to, she could have used her special technique to go home on her own, but it seemed Ononoki-chan had chosen to take a nap instead.

There were days like that.

If I had to say it, even I, Tsukihi's older brother, would most likely feel the same way if I were forced to spend all my time in the same room as her.

However, even though Ononoki-chan had been freeloading at the Araragi residence for quite some time now, it seemed she'd gotten so used to it to the point that she felt comfortable escaping to my car… It wasn't a situation that made me exuberant, but I was a little moved.

"Spoiled, huh… Well, I don't know if I'm all that spoiled, but I'm definitely blessed."

"That's for sure. Your life is on the level where you only died and fell to hell a couple of times, after all."

In the moving car, Ononoki-chan kept turning over and over, as if she was looking for the best position to be in. Combined with her new clothes, she was like a fish that had washed up on land.

Though she was a corpse, she was pretty lively.

"At the very least, I was never abused."

"That's for suuure. There are no parents that don't love their children."

Because of her monotone voice and expressionless face, Ononoki-chan's intentions were even harder to read than Associate Professor Iesumi's, but she probably wasn't saying that in earnest.

The correct phrase was, "There are some parents that can't love their children"—at that point it wasn't really correct anymore, but whether you said it with a monotone or not, "There are no parents that don't love their children" was not very kind.

Not kind to the children that aren't loved, and not kind to the parents that can't love.

"Well, *oni* onii-chan, I think the abuse and violence you once took from Senjougahara Hitagi could be considered dating domestic violence… It makes me laugh to think that, maybe that was the remains of the bad influence that the so-called heroine received from her 'mother'."

"It makes you laugh?"

Stay expressionless for the rest of your life.

I watched the anime version of Zoku Owarimonogatari, you know… So you were talking to me with such an irritating expression in your heart?

"And you like to pass it off as a gag, *oni* onii-chan, but Kanbaru Suruga's messy room can also be considered a result of the darkness in her heart. No wonder Oshino Ougi is hanging out with her. How in the world did Gaen Tooe raise her only daughter?"

"I doubt that she was abusing her, but from what I could tell from talking with her in the mirror world, she didn't seem like the

type of person to be good at raising children…"

"It depends on the definition of abuse, too."

"This isn't a formal debate. I don't want to hear it."

"But I think when it comes to Nade*kou*'s parents, they would find it completely unexpected if you accused them and said, 'What you did to her was abuse'. I bet they'd loudly assert that they were giving the utmost affection to their beloved daughter. Although now, they're finally kicking her ass for becoming a shut-in, telling her to go to work if she's not going to move on to high school, but even that could be called abuse, wouldn't you say? They're trying to throw out a fifteen-year-old girl, after all."

Mm…

Or rather, so the Sengoku family was going through something like that… I couldn't help but worry about my sister's friend, who I'd cut ties with in a completely different manner from the "usual kind" with Oikura. Although I didn't have the qualifications to worry about her anymore.

"You don't need to be qualified to worry about someone. Now, let's go to Nade*kou*'s house right now."

"Don't try to stir the pot of my relationships. And stop calling her Nade*kou*."

"And *oni* onii-chan, don't try to get in the way of my and Nade*kou*'s relationship. You wanna die?"

"I don't want to die. Why do you have to go that far… We're heading for Associate Professor Iesumi's place right now. Apartment number 333. Were you listening?"

Nevertheless, I was grateful to have someone to talk to, even though I was babbling like this… If I hadn't, I probably would have panicked, ended up exceeding the speed limit, and caused a traffic accident—well, probably not, but I would have been stopped by the police, which would have delayed my arrival even more.

"You're already pretty likely to be pulled over with a tween girl in the back seat of your car… Should I try opening the window and shouting 'Help!'"

"Don't suddenly change your character to a little devil character after coming all this way."

"The point of my character is that it's constantly changing. Did you forget? Anyway, isn't it possible for you to just surrender and explain the circumstances to the police?"

"Wh-why? There's nothing at all that I feel guilty about. Even if I thought about plucking those shoulder blades as though they were wings, I'd be perfectly free to do so in my head."

"That's the mindset of a grotesque murderer who can't be aired on television. To pluck them as though they were wings, it sounds like

your dark passions towards that kitty onee-chan are mixed in, too.[3] But not you. I'm talking about the other person with the '*hane*' character, Hagoromo. Not your case, but the professor's case."

"Not that there's a case regarding me. But huh? What?"

"Locking up your daughter in your house and not coming home for three days is enough to call the police, right? What are you doing, obediently going to check on the situation in your car? As I said during the last case with the transistor-slender girl, *oni* onii-chan, you should learn to leave things to the police. I understand how you feel, but the police aren't your enemy, *oni*i-chan."

"What about my feelings are you saying you understand? It's not like I think of the police as hostile. Don't treat them like criminals. But aside from that, Ononoki-chan, you're making a good point, and I was on the verge of doing so."

"Really? You're not just saying that because you don't want me to kill you?"

"I'm not… Why do you want to kill me so badly?"

"If you were on the verge of doing so, then tell me the reason you didn't. Otherwise, I'll turn your beloved car into a demolished car.[4] You included."

That was some pretty scary stuff coming from a girl lying on the back seat, not even trying to get up… But I wasn't about to be turned into scrap. Well, I suppose she was the right person to talk to.

She was a specialist, after all. Not a specialist in child abuse, but…

"There was one thing I found curious during my conversation with Associate Professor Iesumi. If it weren't for that, I would have called the police long ago. All the while booing and jeering at her, ignoring the respect I should have for my superiors. I have this handy item called a cell phone, after all."

"Are you saying it's more convenient than I am?"

"Even if you are the *tsukumogami* of a corpse used for a hundred years, don't kindle a sense of rivalry with a cell phone."

"Make it clear which one of us tools is more useful before you keep going. Corpse doll? Cell phone? Which one?"

"Why those two… All right, the corpse doll."

"Very well. I'll let you off for today. You were lucky that things didn't end in your death. And, the thing you found curious was?"

"More like something I found—odd. When I probed into it, it turned out that it wasn't that Associate Professor Iesumi didn't find her daughter cute from the very beginning. Rather, she had thought that she'd been blessed with the cutest daughter in the world—but, *one day, out of the blue*, she suddenly stopped thinking of her as cute."

She stopped.

Thinking of her as her own child.

"It was as if she'd been swapped with a different child—that was what Associate Professor Iesumi had said. Hey, Ononoki-chan. Ononoki Yotsugi-chan. Doesn't this sound a little familiar to you? Like a story about an oddity."

Something.

Very close to oneself.

"…I'd like to ask something."

Ononoki-chan paused for a moment, and then she asked,

"What's that girl's name?"

It seemed that there had been something that made her specialist's antenna react.

"Iesumi Iie,"

I said.

I pronounced the name that had been told to me—at the very least, this was a person's name, with the hope that that the child would grow up to be able to say "no"[5] to an unacceptable reality.

An oddity story that I'd heard somewhere before.

Or rather, it was an oddity story that I'd heard specifically with regards to the Araragi family—of course, the particulars were different. Actually, they were completely different. To the point that it'd be harder to find the points in common—however, the two cases did faintly resemble each other.

My little sister. Ononoki Yotsugi's current owner.

It was similar to the case of Araragi Tsukihi.

"Ah, ah, ah. That's right, she had those initial settings. I just remembered about Araragi Tsukihi. I'd completely forgotten."

"Don't play dumb. I haven't forgotten or forgiven you for blowing up my sister's upper body, you know?"

And it wasn't her initial settings; she still had those settings presently.

It was due to that oddity story in the first place that Ononoki-chan came to our town, together with her master, Kagenui Yozuru—considering how we'd met at that time, the fact that we were going for a drive together like this seemed like an unbelievable miracle.

It wasn't that we were destined to make up. We found ourselves slowly but surely building up a cooperative attitude, not to mention that even now, Ononoki-chan tried to kill me whenever she saw an opening… I'd called her a freeloader, but in fact she was responsible for my and Shinobu's surveillance.

Well, thinking about it, my reconciliation with Shinobu was like that, too—and, with that, I gave a sidelong glance at the currently empty child seat in my passenger seat.

Anyway, about Araragi Tsukihi.

Her true identity was a phoenix—a cuckoo that took the place of a life in the womb. An immortal oddity that was able to seamlessly blend into society… That was why it had caught the attention of Kagenui Yozuru and Ononoki Yotsugi.

As an evil to be exterminated.

My smaller little sister was a fiend.

"In Tsukihi-chan's case, she's the type of cuckoo that completely blends in with the family… Or rather, the type that assimilates with the unborn child. So I've spent fourteen years not suspecting a thing, but there have to be *oddities that don't do that*, right?"

"It would be more correct to say the *shide-no-dori* hijacks, instead of assimilates… Well, it's up to you however you want to interpret it. Do as you like."

Despite being Ononoki-chan, it seemed she wasn't feeling like reheating an older argument, as she shrugged her shoulders in her laid-down position—her back was pointed at me (my back mirror) just then, so the movement of her shoulder blades was rather suggestive.

"To think that you're unhealthy despite your shoulder blades."[6]

"Shut up."

It was a monotone yet violent retort.

"But, you're pretty sensitive."

"About your shoulder blades?"

"You're the only one bringing up my shoulder blades, *oni* onii-chan."

"Sorry, sorry, I was clavicle, I mean, careless.[7] So what was I sensitive about?"

"From just a brief comment from that professor, you came upon the possibility of a 'replacement child'. I have to praise you for your sensitivity. It's like I don't even have to kill you anymore. Congratulations."

"……"

I'd thought she was a *tsukumogami*, but was I possessed by a *shinigami* instead?

Also, "replacement child"?

There had to be a cooler name for it.

"Well, that just shows how concerned you were for Araragi Tsukihi. I guess you didn't forget or forgive the problem that had been put off last summer vacation."

"That's not… really it."

Or was it?

It was still fresh in my mind that, as if to make up for my past of running away from Hanekawa Tsubasa's family problems, I got completely absorbed into Benikujaku-chan's case, but was I now trying to make up for Tsukihi with Iie-chan? Was that why I didn't call the police, and why I was single-mindedly driving my car to the apartment—

"No, even so, I think you made the right decision. I'm serious. To put it in your terms, as serious as my thigh bone."

"I haven't said anything about your thigh bone yet. That's the ace up my sleeve."

"I'm as serious as the ace up your sleeve. Although I'm sure there are about ten billion people who think that's just normalcy bias, for the sake of protecting the professor who can provide you with the credits you want so much."

"With a calculation like that, you'd have to include Martians. Do I look like a diligent enough dude to do something like this just for

credits?”

“After all, *oni* onii-chan, you’re the former thrall of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade—you may not be the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, I think you still have the intuition of, say, the low-blooded, slow-blooded, paper-plated vampire.”

“The low-blooded, slow-blooded, paper-plated vampire? That last one turned into a plate instead of blood, though.”[8]

“You may not have been the King of Oddities, but you were once the Slave of Oddities, so if there’s something bothering you, we should investigate it properly.”

There’s no need to place the false accusation of being an abusive parent onto one of your prized educators—said Ononoki-chan.

Although I wasn’t so obliged to her that I would call her a prized educator… Today was the first time we had conversed properly, and of course, I wasn’t going to get any credits for smoothly completing this mission.

“If everything goes according to plan, *oni*i-chan, you’ll be the first to discover the dried corpse of a child in the apartment of your professor, but I guess that’s life.”

“That would be even more traumatic than when I went to hell.”

“So you’d end up discovering a corpse while carrying a corpse doll, huh. How thrilling. Although I was planning on warmly watching over you if you were going to extend your clutches to that three-year-old daughter, *oni* onii-chan.”

“Kill me immediately. There would be no better time than that.”

“If that happens, I’ll stand by you. We’re in the same boat, after all.”

For someone being so mean, she was surprisingly cooperative… I wondered if that was her pride as a tool.

If I started to get along with Ononoki-chan like this, then I opened myself up to getting mocked by the likes of Ougi-chan, but then again, what was I supposed to do in order to “officially” reconcile with Ononoki-chan?… There was no law that said the victim had to hate the perpetrator for the rest of their life.

Just as abused children did not have to bear the fate of being tied to their abusive parents forever…

Continuously holding a grudge against someone consumes a lot of energy.

“But apparently such a law did exist in the past. Onee-chan taught me about it before. A law relating to revenge… What was it again? A child whose parents are killed is not allowed to come back to his hometown until he kills the culprits, or something like that.”

“That’s kind of a crazy law… Although it sounds like something Kagenui-san would like. No, but, maybe that was what they thought was normal at the time. If that’s the case, the laws that we take for granted now may be considered absurd and unreasonable in the future.”

“I dunno about that. I bet there were people at the time who thought it was an absurd and unreasonable rule. That’s why, little by little, it would get revised. The system didn’t get to where it is by accident… The tireless efforts of those oppressed are what overturned it.”

The same goes for the family system, said Ononoki-chan.

It seemed she had a thing or two to say about that.

Well, I hadn’t heard the details about it, and I probably would end up feeling bad if I did, but Ononoki-chan was a corpse doll with a history of being used as a “tool” for a hundred years.

“Anyway, if we do assume that the professor stopped thinking of her child as cute because the ‘replacement child’ phenomenon took place, then even if she was abusive, I’m sure her charges can be reduced. Although it wouldn’t be completely false charges. But since it’s not her own child, she doesn’t have any duty to support her.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s okay to be abusive, though.”

She’d ambiguously stated that she felt like she was about to abuse her, but locking her in a cage and leaving her there for three days was clearly not just a failed attempt… She’d abused her after all.

It wasn’t just a failed attempt but willful negligence, to the point that it wouldn’t be strange if it was judged as a murder attempt.

However, if that reason was an oddity phenomenon…

“Was it a variation on spiriting away? A small child goes missing, and after searching around for a while, they come back as a completely different person, or something like that…”

“It’s hard to generalize because there are many different patterns of the ‘replacement child’, but you know, they say that children belong to the gods until they are seven years old. There’s nothing to be done if they’re exchanged one after another under the orders of the gods—but you don’t need to quote any old ghost stories to know that mothers raising other mothers’ children is a common occurrence in nature.”

It didn’t seem like she was just talking about Tsukihi—since Tsukihi’s case was a ghost story, after all.

The brood parasitism of real-life cuckoos would be a prime example… On the other hand, in the insect world, there was the case of the samurai ant that kidnapped ants from other nests and raised them as slaves under their control.

“That also happened in the human world, right? Plenty of

times.”

Ononoki-chan was saying something pretty intense.

It was certainly a shock to hear something like that come from a tween girl’s mouth—what if I made a mistake while driving?

“Don’t fall for any outrageous delusions, *oni* onii-chan. I was referring to the foster care system.”

“You weren’t at all. That’s a cop-out.”

“But speaking of sensitivity, that professor’s intuition is pretty impressive if she noticed the ‘replacement child’ immediately. Although there are a lot of cases where they just end up raising a monstrous apparition without noticing, like you.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

In the case of the Araragi family, it could be that my parents simply had no qualms about inviting a stranger’s child into their home… And Oikura Sodachi had been one of them.

Hmm.

If you asked me, I’d say my parents were pretty philanthropic—though that may have been frustrating for me as a child—but if Associate Professor Iesumi had noticed that her child had been replaced, then…

“It’s what they call, a mother’s love, right? To be honest, that’s not really a term I understand.”

“How can you say that when you begged your mom to buy you a car? Or did you beg your dad?”

“Both. It was a scheme to potentially get two cars if I was lucky.”

“*Oni* onii-chan, you’re the one who should get swapped out. At least your brains. Don’t get greedy for a second car. …By the way, I’m not trying to compete with you, but there’s something about that professor’s words that I found curious.”

“Hm?”

“How did she end up becoming separated from her husband? I’m guessing it wasn’t particularly amicable.”

Right.

I never asked, but that was what I figured, too. If her no longer finding Iie-chan cute was the reason they separated—

“Right there. What did the husband—the ‘father’—think? Did he also no longer find his child cute… That she wasn’t his own child? Basically, the question is, why did the professor still try to raise her own child, instead of trying to push her onto her husband?”

What a shrewd question.

Perhaps I should’ve thought of the husband’s side of the story right then and there and asked her about it… I guess I still only saw what was right in front of me. I probably wouldn’t be able to enter a

third-party panel without thinking a little more about a third party's opinions…

The wording of "pushing her onto him" was a little bad, but if she had decided that she was physically and emotionally incapable of raising the child, she could have left it to the other party who was living separately. Surely the couple had to have discussed it—children held marriages together.

"Maybe it was for the sake of appearances. In Japanese divorce settlements, mothers are more likely to take the children, right?"

Unless, of course, there was a plain-as-white and dark-as-black problem with the mother's behavior, like in the Senjougahara family… The notion that "children should live with their mothers" was still strong.

"That's true. And it's not good for both the father and the mother. As a countermeasure, how about starting with putting Mother's Day and Father's Day on the same day?"

"I almost was about to snap at you not to come up with such a stupid idea, but then again, maybe that's what it's all about…"

"Since it's the mother who has the ability to breastfeed, it's instinctively natural for babies to miss their mothers, and therefore the mother should raise the child—is the theory that some commentators have."

"If we expanded on that a little further, wouldn't it affirm infidelity as an instinct to preserve a variety of offspring…?"

Also, how was weaning taken into account… That only applied to when the child was just a baby, right?

"Just like me, I'm sure the child will lose interest in her mother's boobs by the time they're ten."

"You're too in your element, *oni* onii-chan."

"By that point, my two little sisters were in their growth period, after all."

"The *shide-no-dori* reincarnated in an outrageous family, didn't it."

Depending on the case—specifically, the case when I was overthinking it and it had nothing to do with oddities—it was probably better to get in touch with Associate Professor Iesumi's husband and ask him to take Iie-chan into custody.

Even if I were to play a role in this case, it would only be as a temporary measure—if there was one thing I learned at Naoetsu High, which was beyond my position, it was that "There are limits to what you can do in the moment."

And so, I stepped on the brakes.

We'd arrived at the address that I'd been told.

"We're here, nice *badi*. This is Associate Professor Iesumi's

apartment."

"I see. It looks like it's just been renovated, so it doesn't look like hell, at least. …By 'nice *badi*', are you saying 'nice body'? Or 'nice buddy'?"

As she said that, Ononoki-chan finally sprang up from the backseat, where she'd been laying down until we arrived, in a breakdancing motion—even though she had changed into a maxi dress that stretched all the way down to her ankles, it seemed that her mobility, her biggest selling point as a corpse doll, had not diminished at all.

"Let's go, *oni* onii-chan. Follow my shoulder blades."

"I'm glad you're coming along with me, but there's no need to take initiative, nice *badi*."

Not just because I'd been asked to.

I was going to take both initiative and those shoulder blades with my own two hands.

Speaking of which, even when I'd been constantly going here and there in order to rescue Benikujaku-chan, there'd been a moment where I'd trespassed upon someone's apartment with Ononoki-chan—at the time, Shinobu had been there with us, but now, the sun was still high, so the vampire weak to the sun was still resting.

And last time, I'd come in from the front entrance while Ononoki-chan came in from the veranda, splitting up and using a pincer-attack strategy, but now, I'd been properly given the key from Associate Professor Iesumi, so there was no need to come up with any plans like that.

There was no need, and there was no time.

Let us enter brazenly.

We simply broke through using the method of least resistance—we passed through the auto lock, took the elevator, and made it to Room 333 on the third floor, where Associate Professor Iesumi lived.

"…Thinking about it, introducing your own child to a dangerous individual such as *oni* onii-chan pretty much meets the conditions for abuse, doesn't it?"

"I'm not that dangerous. Just look at my tender smile!"

But even so, even if it wasn't me, she probably wasn't in a normal state of mind to send any student to her house while she was away…

The psychological stress of the possibility that she might abuse her, or the possibility that she was already abusing her, must have been swirling like a storm inside the seemingly intellectual professor—aside from room for sympathy, there was definitely room for consideration.

Without pressing the button for the intercom, I put the key I'd been given into the keyholes (one door, two locks) and opened the door—there was no door chain that kept the door from opening more than ten centimeters, either.

It seemed unlikely that a three-year-old girl in a cage would be able to use the door chain, but sometimes these developments could happen… My whole life was made up of developments like these.

I'd lived and died thanks to developments like these.

Even in the worst-case scenario, there was no door that could not be opened via Ononoki-chan's "Unlimited Rulebook", but if possible I wanted to avoid being destructive—so I was relieved just from the fact that I was able to open the door without any problems, and I was even more relieved when I took a step into the house of a stranger.

My hunch actually turned out to be right, was what I thought.

I don't think a hunch of mine had ever turned out to be right (if anything did, it was always a bad premonition), but had Ononoki-chan's estimation been on the mark…? Although, even if the "replacement child" phenomenon was occurring, that would be "on the mark" for what could only be described as a bad premonition.

At any rate, I'd gotten ahead of myself with the conviction that *that was the case*… In other words, there was no strange odor.

Of course, it was a stranger's home. Naturally, there was a peculiar smell, especially since the home hadn't been ventilated for three days—but it couldn't be called an odor, and I didn't get the impression that the entire apartment gave off any unbearable stench.

This was extremely important.

Some time ago, Ougi-chan had pointed this out to me rather harshly… Because human beings were living beings, they stunk when they died. If a three-year old child, naturally fragile and deserving of protection, was left alone for three days… There was no way they would be able to get away with simply a "stranger's house" scent.

Whether they were alive or dead.

"Like a corpse doll that has been left in a car in the middle of summer. Well, since my body is preserved from decay, I'm completely odorless, though. My own kind of deodorant."

"Deodorant, you say… That reminds me, Ononoki-chan, you changed your boots, too. I loved how stuffy those boots were, though."

Even though I had the professor's permission, I couldn't help but feel like I was trespassing when I came in, and I didn't want to be seen by the other residents, so I quickly closed the door—since I wasn't a thief, we made to take off our shoes, and I found that Ononoki-chan was wearing sandals to match her maxi dress.

They seemed rather breathable, so they probably wouldn't get stuffy. Unfortunately.

"Don't become a shoe fetishist. You're not the prince from Cinderella, *onii*-chan."

"Don't call the prince from Cinderella a shoe fetishist."

Ononoki-chan left her sandals on the porch.

"These were also supplied by Araragi Tsukihi. With her also cutting Nade*kou*'s bangs… She sure loves destroying the identities of others, huh," she said.

"But despite that, she surprisingly loves to devote herself to others, too."

"A very understanding big brother, aren't you. How nice."

We entered the hallway, me in front.

I was wearing socks while Ononoki-chan was barefoot, and

there were… No slippers prepared by the entrance. Apparently the place didn't have many visitors.

Well, a family that abuses its children wouldn't be so sociable as to invite others to their home… That could be how relations broke down and escape routes from domestic violence were blocked off.

"Putting aside your abusiveness, when it comes to domestic violence, I have to say you rank pretty high up there, *oni* onii-chan. Weren't you and your sisters always beating each other up? Even if you're the one who mostly got beaten up, I'm sure that's also a violation of what's called 'consent' these days."

After becoming a vampire, I did cut down on the number of fights—but that was barely an excuse. I had thought that it was normal, that it was what all siblings did; closed-door environments that narrow your insight were pretty frightening.

A closed-door environment—could that be this 3LDK?

The room felt tidy and clean, just like the impression I got from her office… Plus, the hallway was already spacious.

As expected, being a professor at a national university must pay well… No, maybe not. This could just simply be an apartment meant for families. If she and her now-estranged husband were both working, they would probably be able to afford the rent—was it that the three of them were living here, and it was the husband that ended up leaving?

It didn't seem like they'd just moved in, either… Well, it was probably better to put off pretending to deduce things like Sherlock Holmes.

Before putting my imagination to the test, I needed to find the cage… Living room, dining room, kitchen, and three bedrooms. I could go through all of them in order, but thinking about it, it would most likely be in one of the bedrooms, right?

Surely no one in their right mind would want a cage with a three-year-old locked up in a communal space—they'd most likely separate themselves entirely from it, as "something they didn't want to see".

As for whether or not Associate Professor Iesumi was in her right mind… I just had to believe that she was maintaining a minimum level of rationality.

"…Tch."

I came in with a bang, but perhaps because I relaxed a bit when I opened the door, I was starting to get cold feet. If I was going to get scared like this all the time, it was as if going through all those crises was meaningless.

But my shot in the dark that the "replacement child" phenomenon, as Ononoki-chan called it, had occurred could just be

normalcy bias—on the other hand, the possibility that it wasn't just wishful thinking had suddenly become much higher, and while I had loosened up, it was also true that I now had a heightened sense of danger.

Against oddity phenomena, I may as well be considered defenseless. My history of being the slave to an oddity was now far in the past—what was I going to do if the "replacement child" locked in a cage was some unruly evil spirit, a ferocious monster?

Even though it was just a coincidence, it was fortunate and reassuring that Ononoki-chan, a specialist in oddities, had accompanied me… Well, strictly speaking, Ononoki-chan was a specialist that specialized in immortal oddities, so she wasn't necessarily well-versed in the "replacement child" itself—and was it really a coincidence?

No, it was hard to believe that Ononoki-chan had somehow seen through everything in order to hide out in my car… Most likely, the reason the corpse doll used my New Beetle as a camping car really was to take refuge from Tsukihi.

However—what about Tsukihi?

If this adventure with this pairing was not just an accidental event but the result of Araragi Tsukihi's schemes… That would be pretty terrifying.

Tsukihi didn't have any self-awareness.

She didn't, but—even so, as much as she was my sister, she was also a phoenix.

"…I don't know anymore."

I walked straight down the hallway, through the living room, and opened the nearest door. I was afraid I would get confused if I started thinking about which door was the right one—three doors, the Monty Hall Problem—so I wanted to move quickly… I wasn't exactly very lucky with lotteries, so this was a miss.

This was (most likely) Associate Professor Iesumi's bedroom… My tastes didn't include frolicking around in the bedroom of an intellectual lady, so I took a quick glance around the four corners of the room to make sure there were no cages and then quickly moved on to the next room.

The second door.

This was the right one—probably.

I didn't think that because I opened the door to find a cage with a three-year-old inside… But because the door was locked.

Whether I pushed or pulled, the door didn't budge.

At that point, it was already really unsettling… Normally, the only spaces in an ordinary house that can be locked are the bathrooms, right? As long as you didn't have a kid in their rebellious

phase, there wasn't likely to be a bedroom with a lock… And wasn't this the type of lock that could only be locked from outside?

Even before putting her in a cage, did Associate Professor Iesumi also lock her three-year-old daughter in this room…? To isolate her as "something she didn't want to see"?

That had already gone beyond abuse—it was almost as if she was afraid of her own child.

Like an oddity.

A twofold locked room… If you count the lock to the front door, was it actually threefold? Of course, that's assuming there actually was a cage in here…

"Did that intellectual *sensei* not give you the key to this door? *Oni* onii-chan."

"Unfortunately, no. I don't know if she just forgot, or if she chose not to mention it…"

"Is that so."

As soon as I was able to register that Ononoki-chan nodded with her usual blank expression, she kicked open the door—it wasn't even through the use of "Unlimited Rulebook". It was a regular kick in her normal mode. As long as this wasn't a bank vault or some military establishment, a regular kick was enough—the second door collapsed inward on its hinges.

"As expected of the 'Small But Mighty Tank'."

"It's been a while since I've been called by that nickname. Since Waterloo."

"You've served in a war before?"

And.

And, inside was a nursery… If I had to guess, the third room at the farthest end had to be the bedroom of the estranged husband.

It was a nursery fancifully decorated by loving parents—or, to be precise, the remnants of such, vestiges of a baby's room.

Because, if it was a three-year-old's room, there was no need for mobiles hanging from the ceiling anymore, right? Especially not the crib right underneath it… It looked more like a room for a baby that was just barely a year old…Soft toys, pastel-colored wallpaper, remnants of fancy decorations, remnants of affection.

The curtains had been tightly shut.

And the crucial cage?

It was there.

I would have preferred if it wasn't, but it was right there in front of me.

There was no magnificent plot twist in that respect—right next to the crib, there was a sturdy-looking cage, presumably made to keep a dog in.

It was a large cage that seemed difficult to assemble… Wouldn't special equipment be needed for something like this? The cage itself was scary, but so was the effort that went into it… "You'd go that far?" was what I felt. I would think that she went to a lot of trouble to set up a cage of this level. The same went for the lock to this room… It felt like some uncomfortably elaborate device for capital punishment.

Well… The most favorite interpretation would be that Associate Professor Iesumi's mind had been pushed to the point where she'd go this far.

That was something I'd known when I, a mere student, had been approached for something like this—so there was no plot twist that you'd find in a *honkaku* mystery.

For the cage itself.

The plot twist came with the contents of the cage—according to Associate Professor Iesumi's explanation, the cage should have contained her three-year-old daughter, Iesumi Iie, who had been locked up for three days.

According to my inferences, that daughter was not Iie-chan herself, not a human but an oddity, the "replacement child"—however.

Within the innermost part of the threefold locked-room, what was tightly locked up was neither of those two options.

"…*A doll?*"

I whispered. It was just as I saw.

Inside the cage was a doll… Or at least, what appeared to be a doll at first glance, lying on the floor.

"It is a doll," Ononoki-chan agreed.

Since that was coming from a corpse doll herself, that judgment was surely correct.

The doll called a doll a doll.

However, even if the doll was a doll, it wasn't the kind of product you could find in a store, but handmade—and yet I couldn't feel any warmth from it. If I may say so without fear of misunderstanding, it was a creepy doll.

Almost like a cursed doll.

There are those street performances in which they twist balloons into the shape of cats and dogs, right? It was as if the same thing had been done to a thick blanket-like cloth, to create a human form.

The form of a human—more specifically, the form of a baby. And the fact that those twists and turns were so well-done made it all the eerier.

However, it seemed that while the creator of this doll was very skilled at making stuffed toys, they didn't have any artistic ability… The eyes and nose drawn on the doll's face with a marker was a "*henohenomoheji*" face, as if it was some sort of joke. The hair had also been drawn roughly… It was more accurate to say that the head had been painted all over.

Doll-making… Teori Tadatsuru? No, there was no way that man was involved in this case. The act of locking a doll in a cage was completely out-of-character with his "sense of justice". For him, it was not dolls that he locked in cages.

Calm down. This was no time to freak out.

It was a point where I needed to think things through.

"There's no need to think about it. This is obviously *sensei*'s handiwork, right?"

Said Ononoki-chan.

As if she were bored.

"It's handmade."

Surely you weren't expecting some superpowered battle with the "replacement child" that had invaded a stranger's home… The "Small But Mighty Tank" had already shifted her interest from the cursed doll in the cage to inspecting the room.

Oh yeah, that was her specialty. Investigation, analysis.

"You might have already realized this, *oni* onii-chan, but this nursery feels like it was designed for a one-year-old, at best two-year-old child."

“Yeah—so up to that point, Associate Professor Iesumi was feeling affection for her child, right? But afterwards, she ended up not thinking she was cute or that she was her own child anymore—”

“Didn’t the baby die?”

Said Ononoki-chan, detachedly.

Moving from place to place around the room.

“When she was two years old or so. Because of illness or an accident or an incident or something.”

“Eh? But, even so, to say she died…”

“If you’re a gentle *oni*i-chan who can’t stand the idea of a dead child, then allow me to offer another possibility. That’s right, what if the daughter is currently under the care of the estranged husband? At any rate… Whether she’s alive or dead, as of over a year ago, Iesumi Iie must have left the hands of that *sensei*.”

She declared.

It seemed that Ononoki-chan had already discovered several pieces of evidence from this room—or from the hallway, or even from Associate Professor Iesumi’s bedroom—that I, as an amateur, could not find.

“Yeah. At the very least, I don’t see any indication that there were at least two people living in this enclosed space. In any form. If you let me take a peek at the contents of the trash cans and the refrigerator, I might be able to tell you a hundred more things… But we don’t have to go that far.”

“……”

“At any rate, it’s quite touching. I like this kind of thing. A sob story about a mother who loses her child and carries around a homemade baby doll as compensation. No matter how common, no matter how mundane it is.”

It was certainly something to cry about. At least, I couldn’t laugh at it.

I belatedly looked around the interior of the nursery, imitating Ononoki-chan—remains of fancy decorations, remnants of affection. And then… the cursed doll.

If that was the case.

It was a hell of a designer baby.

“After losing her own child, she made a child by hand to take her place—but in the end, it wasn’t her own child. So she didn’t find it cute, and naturally, she didn’t think it was hers, either?”

“Because it wasn’t her child at all. It’s just a lump of cloth.”

“How absurd.”

“Exactly. It makes an absurd amount of sense.”

Ononoki-chan spoke in a monotone to the very end.

That aspect of hers wouldn’t change, even though her fashion

had changed—to the very end, she was a doll. In that respect, the "*henohenomoheji*" seemed much more charming.

"It makes sense why she asked *oni* onii-chan for advice, too. As far as I know, under the laws of this country, it's not a crime to abuse or imprison a mere doll—if this were to be revealed, it would only make things easier for her."

"Easier… Do you think Associate Professor Iesumi is aware of this herself? That is, um, how should I put it… Does she believe with all her heart that this stuffed doll is Iie-chan? Or is it that she knows that it's a fake doll and has the awareness that it's not her child, but she just can't stop?"

So did she try to stop, by asking for help from one of her students?—did she ask for my help not because I was a specialist of child abuse, but because I was a convenient third party with no real stake in the matter?

Because I had nothing to do with it?

"Even if you have no real stake in the matter, there's still a power dynamic. If you're a teacher and they're a student, then it's easier to get them to listen to you… It's easier to control them."

"……"

Was she saying that me standing here like this was all according to that university professor's expectations? Well, I wasn't so innocent that I would be shocked by something like that. I was pretty used to being used and taken advantage of.

I was a nineteen-year-old with experience being a slave.

However, if that was going to happen, then I would prefer it if someone became happy as a result… I didn't want to be a part of any scheme to "make it all go to hell and back".

"To cover for that intellectual *sensei* whom I've never met, I think it's probably an unconscious scheme. She's suffering, too. Like a mother who can't help but abuse her beloved child."

"Is that what you would call a snide remark, Ononoki-san?"

"That's what I was aiming for, but did it get through? Well, if I may say so as a specialist of oddities, I would recommend that your professor seek counseling. She may appear to be maintaining her sanity on the surface, but she must be on the precipice. As for the question of whether or not she believes this handmade stuffed doll is her child, I would say that she believes it with all her heart, and that she doubts it with all her heart."

She believes, and she doubts.

It was a very human skill.

So there was no room for any oddities to appear here… There was no need to call for a former vampire or the *tsukumogami* of a corpse. If that's the case, let's leave it at that. Like Ononoki-chan said,

there was no need to go as far as checking the refrigerator or the trash cans. As well as the third room, which was probably the husband's bedroom.

"……Hm?"

Feeling like I'd been rejected, I'd been about to turn on my heel when I needlessly realized something—I ended up needlessly realizing something.

This was the bad part about me. The worst part about me.

Perhaps out of curiosity to look at something frightening, because I looked at the stuffed doll in the cage one last time—I sensed something unnatural in the way it was balanced.

It seemed that it was just carelessly thrown into the cage, but there was something off in its posture… With its shape being so short and stout, would it really be that stable with such a strange pose?

Was there something to its center of gravity? Like a dumbbell was placed inside the stuffed doll or something… It would make the weight more realistic than just having a lump of cloth… No, if that were the case, the entire plushie would have a slightly more distorted form.

Or was there something supporting it from the back that you couldn't see from the front?

"What's the matter? *Oni* onii-chan. Let's go. You wanna die?"

"Um. Well…"

I reined in Ononoki-chan, who was planning on killing me again, and approached the cage with trepidation… The cage was placed in the far corner of the room, right up against the wall, so it was quicker to peek in from directly above than to try and look from behind.

It would probably be quickest to open the simple bolt lock and take out the stuffed doll to check it out, but even before saying that I was afraid to touch it, I didn't think I had the qualification to touch it.

The only person who should be allowed to touch it was Associate Professor Iesumi herself—with that in mind, I looked down at the cage.

"…Hey, Ononoki-chan. Just to be sure, I'd like to check something… About the fact that abusing a baby doll by locking it in a cage is, well, not really a crime."

"What is it. Stop being so implicative. I really am going to kill you, okay?"

"Right. It's about that 'killing'."

"?"

"In this country, is it a crime to stab a baby doll in the back?"

When I looked.

To keep the handmade stuffed doll from toppling over, its

unnatural pose was supported from behind by a deeply pierced fruit knife.

I wanted the sensibility to be able to say, nihilistically, that there was no difference between abusing a stuffed doll and stabbing a stuffed doll, and that if anything, it was exactly the same.

However, as far as I knew, a fruit knife was not a tool for stabbing objects other than fruit. It should not be a weapon for stabbing a doll, especially a doll that was a substitute for one's own child.

This completely changed the meaning of the threefold locked room—it was supposed to be a confinement incident, but it turned out to be a locked room murder.

Of course, even if it was in human form, a doll was still a doll… Even if you stabbed one, it wouldn't scream or bleed… The expression of "killing a doll" had no mathematical truth to it.

A doll wouldn't die. Because it was never alive in the first place.

Unless it was a corpse doll, it wouldn't die from stabbing, cutting, or peeling.

That's why it was so unusual, the act of stabbing a non-living, non-dead doll in the back—the act was not abuse by a long shot, but a heinous crime that could not be televised, on the level of plucking out shoulder blades.

Well, needless to say, if we took this as a locked room murder, then the killer had to be none other than Associate Professor Iesumi. She stabbed the stuffed doll, threw it in the cage, and bolted the lock. She left the room and locked the doll from the hallway side. Then she put on her shoes, went outside, and locked the front door—there was no mystery in how it happened.

The mystery was her motive.

It was contradictory… I might be able to understand if she had killed the doll after abusing it. It was rather unpleasant, but not incomprehensible… In the heat of the moment, either by escalation or by willful negligence, a fragile life can easily die.

If you locked an infant in a cage and left them there for three days, they would probably die from malnutrition or some other reason… It was a bit repugnant, but not contradictory.

But stabbing them and then locking them in a cage? The stuffed doll believed to be one's own child… What on earth was the meaning of that order of operations, that contradictory combination?

The act of stabbing it in the back made it clear that there was an intent to kill, which made things even more confusing.

For what reason, for what purpose, did Associate Professor

Iesumi do such a thing—was it according to her intentions that I, the "first to discover", would end up confused like this, like a storm?

Had she expected it?

Even if she really believed that this stuffed doll was her child, she should know better than I do how bad it would be for me to witness this.

Or was it wrong to even try and understand it? It was true that if I really wanted to know, I had to ask the person herself.

If anything, it was the kind of psychological profile I didn't want to know about. And, if possible, I didn't want to have anything to do with it anymore… I was determined to not attend a single Swiss German class in the second term after summer break.

…But, I couldn't just do that.

I sighed as I finally left the room with Ononoki-chan, who made no comment about the fruit knife.

It wasn't that I wanted the credits that badly, but I couldn't afford to not return the key given to me by the professor… It was a bit much to suggest counseling to an adult who was almost ten years older than me, but no matter what the circumstances, no matter what darkness she held, as a person who had been asked for help, I had to report what I saw as I saw it.

I didn't think anyone would believe me… But just to be safe, I figured I should have a third party present when I returned the key.

It was wise to avoid meeting one-on-one. It would be dangerous for both parties…

There was no guarantee that there wasn't a fruit knife somewhere in that clean lab.

In order to not cause the creation of a perpetrator, I must not become a victim.

It was obvious that I couldn't ask Ononoki-chan to accompany me that far, so if we were talking about responsibility, the third party who should be present should definitely be Oikura Sodachi… But I had cut ties with that sweetheart… Um, then, someone else I could rely on… Someone who was still at the university at this hour without having gone home, preferably someone who knew Associate Professor Iesumi…

With those thoughts running through my head, I drove my New Beetle back to Manase University with the tween girl in my back seat, but as it turned out, those thoughts were neither shoulder blade nor thighbone, but a total waste of bone.

You could even say the backbone had been taken out of it.

Though I didn't want to say—it was a waste of bone-breaking labor.

Just a few hours ago, I had met with Associate Professor

Iesumi Hagoromo, a university teacher and mother of a child, who'd been struggling with this and that. And when I visited her office again, she'd disappeared.

All of a sudden.

She'd disappeared—she'd vanished.

The next day, the day after that, the day after that, and the day after that.

She stopped showing up for work—she left me the keys to her house, locked her child in a cage, and then concealed her whereabouts.

It was almost as if she'd been spirited away.

But if so, what had she been replaced with?

009

The long-awaited summer break has begun! Yay!

Now, what kind of fun should I have with everybody?

…Of course it wouldn't end up being like that. It wouldn't end with that sort of development, and it certainly wouldn't feel like it—as if I would let it. It was just a troublesome matter. "How did things turn out like this?" was practically my favorite phrase at this point, but I particularly thought so for this particular matter. I was sure I didn't make any mistakes up to this point—or perhaps, should I have not responded to the summons from the professor at all?

As if I could have known that that professor would disappear right after talking to me… How was I supposed to know that I would be the last person to see her? I hadn't had a bad feeling about it at all. Perhaps I hadn't introduced myself yet, but I was a former vampire, not a prophet. I couldn't, and didn't want to, say anything that would make it seem as if I'd seen into the future, like some Hawaiian-shirt guy who was off wandering about somewhere.

A university professor went missing right after exams. Naturally, the campus would be in an uproar, and it would be a big deal… As a matter of course, various places also came to ask me about the situation. Well, I pulled through it decently enough… A decent amount of deception was basically my specialty, and I wasn't so inconsiderate as to tell others about the state of the nursery in Room 333 without the owner's permission. First of all, how was I supposed to tell someone about something I didn't even understand?

It seemed the exams were graded by one of the office aides or the professor, so my exam paper was safely returned to me—apparently, the disappearance of one person was not enough to hold up the academic institutions of the present. In other words, there was no job that could only be done by one person in particular. Incidentally, I received a grade of C and the corresponding number of credits. Although that was the last thing on my mind at the moment.

If I wanted to interpret this situation realistically, without bringing in any oddity phenomena like spiriting away or the "replacement child", then… Associate Professor Iesumi, who sent me to check on her house, belatedly regretted her actions, which could only have been an expression of unsound mind… The most likely explanation would be that she feared that the abuse of "her own child" would become public and cause a fuss, and she thus made the decision to "flee".

It wasn't a crime to abuse a handmade doll, and it wasn't a crime to stab that doll in the back—so, even if I were to find out and

spread that information out to the world, there was no need to run away out of desperation, but that was just in legal terms. And, as Ononoki-chan said, it was unclear to what extent Associate Professor Iesumi was self-aware.

Her symptoms and awareness could have varied depending on the day, as well—so perhaps I shouldn't be trying to force some sort of consistency, when both the request and the escape felt illogical.

This wasn't a mystery novel. Nor was it a game to find the culprit.

There were some absurd conspiracy theories being whispered around at the university that the professor had been abducted by a special agency because of her top-secret research that had been commissioned by the state, but if I had to guess normally, I would say that Associate Professor Iesumi had simply left all her memories behind and returned to her birthplace of Switzerland… She'd said that she'd come to Japan to escape from her parents, with whom she'd had a bad relationship, but even if she went back, there must be a way to avoid meeting them.

I could even force myself to imagine a happy ending where they let go of their differences and mended their relationship.

The power of one's imagination was limitless, for better or worse.

Especially for the worse—even though there was no need for me to do so, when I imagined Associate Professor Iesumi running from one place to another, it wasn't exactly relieving for me… No, in the end, no matter how I interpreted it, when I thought that I could be the direct cause of her disappearance, well… It left me depressed.

It left me empty inside.

In theory, I knew. If I, a "specialist of child abuse", had refused her request, Associate Professor Iesumi would have simply reached out to another student who would have listened to her, and the situation would have converged towards something similar…In the end, everything, including her abusive behavior towards her "three-year-old daughter", was really just her one-woman show.

From beginning to end, the control of the story had been firmly within her grasp.

But that was just in theory. My emotions were different.

So, instead of a glorious start, my first summer break in college got off to a rather unpleasant start… I wouldn't go so far as to say that it was hellish, but the trip to Hokkaido with Hitagi, which I'd made plans to make plans for, had to be postponed once again.

We'd met briefly to discuss it, but as expected, she was very astute and didn't fail to miss my lack of excitement.

Well, in the first place… The promise was that we'd go in

winter, when it was crab season.

With that, if I had been left alone, I could have spent the entire summer brooding over Associate Professor Iesumi, but my socializing ability had become better than it was before, so it was hard for me to be left alone.

How wonderful.

So, that morning, I received a message on my cell phone.

It was from a high school girl and my friend, Higasa-chan.

"Araragi☆senpai☆we☆are☆having☆a☆girlsbas☆senior☆junior☆
☆First☆let's☆meet☆up☆at☆Ruga's☆house☆!
☆GO☆GO☆right☆now☆!☆☆☆☆"

It was hard to read.

With her name meaning a rain of stars, perhaps she was trying to make a meteor shower occur in her messages, but in the first place, wasn't this pretty hard to type out?

I tried deciphering it… Hmm… A senior-junior social…? It seemed that, within the span of a few months, the Naoetsu High girls' basketball team, which had been on the brink of collapse, had finally gotten back on its feet enough to do something like that.

Since I'd helped to the best of my limited ability, it was great news to hear, and I would be happy to visit my alma mater if my attendance at the meeting would bring the club any closer to what it was in its heyday.

No, I wasn't expecting anything about popularity, and to be honest, I didn't want to take one step inside my alma mater again…

But I guess it could be a change of pace.

It wasn't because I'd screwed up on a mission, but I still wanted to feel like I was being useful to someone—oh yeah, speaking of deciphering.

I wonder how that "thing" I gave to Meniko was going? I hadn't heard anything from her since then… Since it was her, it was possible she forgot about it.

Well, it didn't hurt to give it a shot.

If it didn't work out, then that was fine. I would almost prefer it if it didn't work out.

The first thing to do was to meet at Kanbaru's house (did she even get approval for this? Higasa-chan did have the habit of using a friend's house without permission), so I got changed and went downstairs in order to leave the house.

And, at the entrance, I ran into Tsukihi.

My sister in a kimono, Araragi Tsukihi… My smaller little sister changed her hairstyle from time to time, and her current hairstyle such that all her hair, including her bangs, was tied up in one big ponytail.

Her forehead was cute, to the point that it made me irritated.

"My, my, if it isn't onii-chan. Just the right time. Have you seen my precious stuffed doll?"

"Stuffed doll—"

Ononoki-chan, huh.

That tween girl must have gotten fed up with being used as a dress-up doll again and evacuated from my sisters' room… If so, she might be rolling around in the back seat of my New Beetle again, but I didn't care how much Tsukihi was my beloved sister—I couldn't let her know that.

I'd caused a lot of trouble for Ononoki-chan, so I wanted to at least protect her from the clutches of my little sister… In the end, I didn't talk to her at all about the incident with Associate Professor Iesumi, but being a doll herself, Ononoki-chan may have had her own thoughts when she saw the doll stabbed in the back.

Well, it was just that we didn't discuss the case of Associate Professor Iesumi. We talked as usual about TV dramas or the new Häagen-Dazs ice cream, so there was a strong possibility that Ononoki-chan decided to leave the case as "settled".

At any rate, there was only one answer I could give.

"Sorry, I have no clue. I don't know everything, I just know what I know."

"Whose line was that, again? I feel like I've heard it before."

Even though you adored Hanekawa so much last summer, you've already forgotten about her… I was a little jealous of her refreshingly forgetful nature.

I wished I could split my low spirits with her.

"Oh, whatever. Forget that stuffed doll. It's about time to buy a new one, anyway."

"That's a little too refreshing!"

"So, onii-chan. Where are you headed, all dressed up like that?"

"Oh? This area's famous fashion advisor, Tsukihi-chan, thinks that I'm dressed up?"

"Yep. It looks like you've dressed up to get high school girls to fawn over you."

How shrewd.

I'll take it as a compliment.

"I'm going to meet Higasa-chan."

"Ah. Her. Hasn't she been coming over, like, three times a week?"

It seemed they'd become acquainted.

Well, she was coming over three times a week.

"Incidentally, about her given name, you write it as 'rain of

stars', right? But how are you supposed to read it? Seiu? Hoshiame?"

"Either way is fine, she says. It's the same as how Abe no Seimei can also be read as Abe no Haruaki."

"Is, is that allowed…?"

"And where are you headed out to? That kimono is for outdoors, right? Patrolling with Karen-chan?"

"It's been a while since the Fire Sisters broke up, onii-chan. For me, that's just one of my past hits. Karen-chan's gone hiking with her high school friends, and I'm going hiking with my middle school friends."

Hiking?

Is that a trend with middle schoolers right now?

It was hard to catch up with the trends of youngsters these days.

In Karen-chan's case, I could bet that it was some severe mountain climbing again… But Tsukihi shouldn't have been the outdoors type?

"Right. Y'see, I heard a rumor that there was a dead body buried deep in the mountains of a neighboring town, so we all decided to go check it out. Like, pretending it's Stephen King's *The Body*."

"…*The Body*?"

"Yeah. I'm a fan of the original work."

How pretentious.

Well, maybe it was a little healthier than the Fire Sisters pretending to be heroes of justice… As an older brother who had just had an adventure that could have led to the discovery of not a dead body deep in the mountains, but the body of an abused child, it was somewhat difficult to rebuke her.

In my case, even my companion had been a corpse… But, seeing as how Tsukihi was also looking for Ononoki-chan, she might have been planning to go hiking with that stuffed doll in hand.

Perhaps that was an example of her shrewdness.

Like equipping yourself with jewelry to go on a treasure hunt.

In any case, after becoming a college student, I shouldn't meddle too much with my little sister's behavior… Being swept up in such inappropriate gossip was also a part of youth.

It was also a good thing that the two sisters, who had a very close relationship, were now taking a healthy distance from each other after being separated by middle school and high school.

"But if you actually find a corpse, then make sure you call the police, okay?"

"Of course. Who do you think I am?"

"Tsukihi-chan, of course."

Hm.

But with all three kids going out on their own, the Araragi household was at peace—at the very least, none of them were locked in cages.

"Tsukihi-chan. We're truly blessed, you know."

"Hmm? What are you saying, all of a sudden?"

"I mean, we didn't have to worry about what to wear, what to eat, or where to sleep. Maybe I should be more grateful to our parents."

"What's the matter? What happened to that onii-chan that would run off somewhere every Mother's Day?"

"I didn't run off anywhere this year! As promised."

"You weren't here for Father's Day. Neither hide nor hair."

"I didn't promise anything for Father's Day."

I haven't exactly become upfront about my feelings regarding my father yet.

Well, putting Mother's Day and Father's Day on the same day was something I'd already discussed with Ononoki-chan, so I wasn't going to repeat myself here.

"Well, there was a bunch of stuff like you jumping off rooftops and being kidnapped by a group of delinquents."

"There was, wasn't there."

"But I'm really thankful that our house is at peace."

I'd experienced things like a hell of a spring break and a nightmare of a Golden Week, but basically, all of those had happened outside my home.

It wasn't like my home became hell or my family became a nightmare… No matter how bad the parent-child or sibling relationship got, I never felt like my life was in danger.

I'd always had a seat at our dinner table.

The filial piety that Senjougahara Hitagi was forced to show her mother; the fact that Hanekawa Tsubasa slept and woke up in the hallway; those were things I still couldn't digest very well… No matter how close we cuddled, no matter how harshly I was yelled at, I would never truly be able to understand their suffering.

Even when I was confronted with an incident that put me close to death, it was still just a temporary accident—a limited-duration tragedy, so to speak.

It wasn't anything like an unforeseeable eternity where I wouldn't be protected by a guardian.

"That's true. If there were problems at home, then Karen-chan and I wouldn't have had to go out to look for evil, would we? The only problem that the Araragi family has is that the older brother looks at his younger sisters in a sexual way."

"That's too big of a problem. And I don't do that. I look at you

with contempt."

"I should be grateful. Well, I'm sure parents remember the joys of parenthood, so I guess you could say it's mutual."

"That's not something you can say. You're on the children's side."

"I swear that when I'm reborn, I'll become a mother to Mom and Dad, and take good care of them!"

How complicated.

Well, when you in particular talked about rebirth, there was a fair amount of truth to that… Considering you were a cuckoo.

A *shide-no-dori*.

And—a phoenix.

"In that case, Tsukihi-chan. Shouldn't you be saying that when you're reborn, you want to be a daughter to Mom and Dad again?"

"For sure! I'm really glad I was born into the Araragi family! I'm so happy to be born the daughter of Mom and Dad and the sister of onii-chan and Karen-chan! I never asked to be born, though!"

"You said a little too much, there."

"If I'm going to be greedy, I'd like to be reborn as your older sister, onii-chan! I want you to be my little brother that I can pick on!"

"Again, a little too much."

I could do without being on the receiving end of your abuse.

I figured that I would go along with walking to my alma mater as the athletic types would, but, as a non-athletic type, I decided to drive to our first meeting place, Kanbaru's Japanese mansion (I may have wanted to show my juniors my driving skills). And to my surprise, there was no Ononoki-chan in the back seat.

So she wasn't taking refuge here…? Then, perhaps she had gone to play at Sengoku's place… She sure was active for a corpse.

Oh well, regardless, it wasn't like I could take a tween girl to a girlsbas social… So, if things proceeded according to schedule, I was supposed to meet up with two of my juniors from Naoetsu High, Kanbaru Suruga and Higasa Seiu, but…

"Well, well, it has been a while, Araragi-senpai—how have you been? It's me, Suruga-senpai's biggest fan, the second-year, Oshino Ougi."

The junior who greeted me at the huge gate of the Kanbaru residence was, astride a BMX, the high school boy version of Oshino Ougi—since the Kanbaru residence was Kanbaru Suruga's territory, it seemed he was in boy mode.

As usual, he showed up with that sort of self-introduction.

How tactful of him.

"…What about the two high school girls?"

"It seems that they were delayed in shopping for the party, so they left me to watch the house. With Suruga-senpai having so much faith in me, isn't it obvious that I was instructed to keep Araragi-senpai company?"

It was hard to believe Kanbaru would entrust Ougi-chan—er, Ougi-kun—with watching the house, but if it was obvious, then I guess nothing could be done.

It was obvious, after all.

"I also had some business to attend to with Suruga-senpai, so it was perfect timing. No need to worry, as I won't do anything like follow you to that social. How about it? While we wait for those two to return, why don't we form a duo and clean up Suruga-senpai's room?"

"Two boys shouldn't mess around in a girl's room while she's out…"

"Aah, Araragi-senpai, so you actually are conscious of Suruga-senpai as a girl? Have you been looking at my Suruga-senpai in that way?"

"……"

Boy mode Oshino Ougi was hard to deal with. No, I guess he

was like this even when he was a girl? Either way, it felt pretty fresh for me, seeing as I never really had the chance to talk with other high school boys when I was in high school.

It was like, there was no need for Araragi Koyomi to stand firm against Oshino Ougi.

"Although, I'm secretly in the Higasa-senpai camp," said Ougi-kun. "So no fighting over her, okay?"

"Even though you keep going on about Suruga-senpai. That's way too secret. And fighting over her…"

"Ha ha. Then, would you like to trade and make your fave a 'replacement child'?"[9]

"…Haha."

I couldn't let my guard down.

Even if "Ougi-kun" was the darkness in Kanbaru's heart, he was still the exact same as the "Ougi-chan" that was the darkness in my heart, so I should've expected him to see through me to this extent.

Since he was Oshino Meme's niece—Oshino Meme's nephew.

"No, no, I don't know anything. You're the one who knows, Araragi-senpai."

"I wish I did. I said this to Tsukihi-chan earlier, but I only know what I know."

"In that case, how would you like to complain to your devoted junior about the circumstances that you know of? Just use that power dynamic to make me quietly listen without resistance."

"Do I look like the kind of senior that would perform such a power play?"

Especially since you weren't the type to listen quietly.

All you did was resist.

But, well, rather than wasting time in front of Kanbaru's house, I may as well bring up child abuse and the professor's disappearance as the topic of the conversation.

If I made the mistake of complaining to Kanbaru or Higasa-chan, it would do nothing but put a damper on the senior-junior social… This wasn't the fable of "The King with Donkey Ears", but if I chattered away at Ougi-chan… er, Ougi-kun, then perhaps it could lift my spirits.

With that excuse in mind, I summed things up as concisely as possible and bared my emotions to Ougi-kun—something like this was like talking to myself to the extreme, but, well, it was a tradition of Araragi Koyomi to be loose-lipped when Oshino Ougi was his conversation partner.

"I see. A threefold locked room. That makes me really happy. These days, we don't hear much about locked-room tricks anymore,

do we?"

"There's no need for you to act all innocently happy about that. There may have been locked rooms, but none of the doors had any tricks on them."

Ever since then, I'd been keeping the key to the professor's apartment in the pocket of my pants, and shrugged my shoulders with that in mind—she'd disappeared before I could return it, but that didn't mean I could throw it away, so I'd been carrying it around with me the whole time.

Maybe that was a bad thing.

"Not to mention, Ononoki-chan kicked down the second door."

"Indeed. To put it in a rather dull way, producing impossible crimes such as locked-room murders is probably not what intellectual criminals do. Although there is no occupation more intellectual than a university professor,"

said Ougi-kun with a smirk.

Even when he heard a story full of heavy words like "abuse" and "disappearance", he didn't waver a bit—regardless of his gender, he had to be like this, huh.

"So, what do you think? Ougi-kun."

"And what do you mean by what I think?"

"About the contradiction. Of the right and wrong behind the action of stabbing a cloth doll that looked like her own child, and then locking it in a cage."

"If it's a question of right or wrong, then it's most certainly wrong. And if it's a matter of the contradictory spear and shield, then I would say it's the shield."

"The shield?"

"It's self-protection. Defense. For reference, the spear would be aggression based on resentment and murderous intent."

"…Stabbing a defenseless doll in the back is self-protection?"

"Yes. A cowardly crime, to kill before you yourself are killed."

He'd said it wasn't something an intellectual criminal would do, but a cowardly crime… His criticism of Associate Professor Iesumi was pretty intense.

Was that coming from my inner psyche?

But Ougi-kun was different from Ougi-chan in that the origin of his existence was based on Kanbaru… But, in terms of what lay beneath Kanbaru's surface…

"Oh please, Araragi-senpai. I'm not criticizing Associate Professor Iesumi at all."

"Eh?"

"After all, there's no evidence—we can't assume that Associate Professor Iesumi is the one who stabbed the defenseless doll in the

back.”

Innocent until proven guilty—said Ougi-kun.

Of course, as a resident of a constitutional state, I was certainly aware of that rule… But, huh?

It was true that there was no evidence. Now that he mentioned it.

It wasn’t as if forensics came in and checked the fingerprints on the fruit knife, and more importantly, they didn’t perform any interview of the person in question… It was all something I’d just come up with on my own.

I was the one who knew—

“There was no criminal investigation performed. If I had to say it, then what was performed was simply media manipulation.”

“……”

Hold on. I had to think about this properly.

It was a matter of civil rights… It wasn’t the first time for Ougi-kun to jump on one of my carelessly-made comments, but if it became a hotbed for false accusations, then it needed to be examined seriously.

Right.

It was a contradiction.

I had felt very uncomfortable in the nursery because I’d felt that the act of stabbing in the back the abused doll that resembled one’s child was inconsistent, but if I interpreted it in parts, the contradictory spear and shield would not clash.

As for the “truth” that she locked her “three-year-old daughter” in a cage at home, she’d confessed that in her own stammering words when she made the request to me… So when I saw the blade stuck in the doll in the cage, I didn’t hesitate to accept that it was also the work of Associate Professor Iesumi.

“However, you just went and felt uncomfortable all on your own, didn’t you? When people feel things like, ‘This is weird,’ or, ‘How did this happen?’ or, ‘Why did things turn out like this…’, it’s usually because multiple people were rampantly involved from multiple directions. That’s why it goes beyond your comprehension.”

Multiple people—multiple culprits.

No, that made it sound as if there was an accomplice, but in this case, if this was a complete division of labor by individual people with no communication…

A system where confidentiality is maintained by dividing the work into small segments and assigning them to large numbers of disparate people so that no one can see the big picture—a system where not only outsiders, but also the people themselves, didn’t know what they were doing.

To put it simply.

I hadn't considered at all the possibility that the "culprit that had encaged" Iie-chan and the "culprit that had stabbed" Iie-chan were completely different people.

The act of abusing her, and the act of murdering her.

The pieces of the puzzle seemed to sit right next to each other, and yet they did not need to be joined together.

"……"

But… It raised some other questions.

First, if we adopted the idea that there was a child murderer in addition to a child abuser, then the question was, who and where were they?

And how did they manage to carry out the crime?—was another question. That was what good old-fashioned mysteries were about. Threefold secret rooms and impossible crimes.

Most of the logic that was based on the fact that the crime scene was Associate Professor Iesumi's home collapsed, and the killer's image, motive, and trick became inexplicable.

"Not quite."

"What do you mean, Ougi-kun?"

"That sort of typical assistant role doesn't suit you, Araragi-senpai. I don't know anything, so please use your brain cells to think about the main point. Your little gray cells, that is."

How shameless.

But I couldn't get used to relying on this kid—I'll stretch out the wings of my imagination as far as I can so that I can get to say the phrase that suits me: "It's elementary, my dear Ougi-kun."

Putting aside the motive for now. Not like I was the queen of motives. In the case of Associate Professor Iesumi, whether it was abuse or murder, "because she is my daughter" (which should be the reason to protect her) could paradoxically be connected to the motive… If there was another culprit, then there were infinite variations on why people would kill other people.

"I dunno about that. Most of the time, people kill for love, grudges, money, or war. If you include accidents, then there are only five patterns. You can count them on one hand."

It seemed that Ougi-kun took on the role of my assistant, but he was quite the nasty assistant… He was just making fun of me instead of supporting my detective role at all.

He should never take charge of the narration.

"When it comes to a reason to kill a three-year-old, perhaps we should include perverted sexual desire as a motive. Not to mention, it would be a doll."

What the heck.

Anyway, putting the motive aside… What about the locked-room trick?

The bolt lock on the cage wasn't a problem. It didn't even require lockpicking. However, the only one who could unlock the nursery door, as well as the front door, was the homeowner, Associate Professor Iesumi, herself—

"I wonder about that. After all, the first door was unlocked by you, Araragi-senpai, and the second door was spectacularly broken through by Ononoki-chan, correct?"

With superficial politeness, my assistant's verbal jabs did not stop—but see, I could respond to that. After all, the second door was broken through, as if knocked down with a battering ram.

Rather than spectacular, it was destruction I would rather not spectate.

Even I could only open the first door because the homeowner had entrusted me with the key, and without it, it would have been impossible to get into that locked room—or did the culprit have a spare key?

Perhaps they temporarily borrowed the house key from the professor's key ring… Or they stole the master key from the apartment's management…

"Huh? What if… they didn't have to go that far?"

What if it wasn't a spare key?

If it wasn't—then the locked-room nature of the second door, and the problem of the motive that I had set aside… Frighteningly enough, they could all be solved in one fell swoop.

"Wh, wh-wh, what do you m-m-m-mean? Th, th-th, that they didn't, didn't, didn't, have to go that f, f-f-f-far."

"Don't start pretending to be an assistant now."

That assistant was trembling way too much. He's so out of his mind he's acting like a DJ.

Why couldn't you do things properly?

No, the one who couldn't do things properly was me—this deduction was something I should've come up with when I was right there.

I opened my mouth.

If it wasn't a spare key, but a legitimate key that the owner had proper ownership of.

"It's not necessarily the case that the estranged husband left his keys behind when he left that apartment, right?"

Saying that it wasn't necessarily the case that he left his keys behind[10] sounded like a bad pun, but please ignore it—sometimes I'm the one that's out of his mind.

Originally, I was selfish, had few friends, tended to be at odds with others, and was not very good at working with others, which was why I couldn't come up with such an obvious idea, but the fact that I had overlooked the possibility that the crime scene was a joint effort between the couple was an embarrassing blind spot.

I'd paired up as buddies with a vampire, a corpse doll, a god, and the darkness in my heart, though… However, although the term "collaboration" may sound appropriate, it was still a misnomer.

The mother who committed abuse. The father who committed murder.

Because the process was so disjointed, the scene of the crime looked so inexplicable—if the husband came home while Associate Professor Iesumi was away, and then stabbed his wife's handmade work in the back.

With the motive of "because she was his daughter".

Was his wife's behavior, which was also the cause of their separation, too unpleasant to watch—or did the husband also think it was "his child" and stab the doll for that reason?

The extreme possibility was that he felt sorry for her because she was locked in a cage, so took pity on her and put an end to her… Did he stab her in the back because he couldn't kill her while looking that "*henohenomoheji*" face in the eyes?

There could be infinite variations on the motive.

No, no no, this was still just an assumption. The wings of my imagination were flapping too much. It wasn't right to be so insistently suspicious of the husband who I'd never met, the husband whose name I didn't even know. The freedom of my inner heart should be used for little girls, tween girls, and young girls, not for suspecting someone of trespassing or murder.

"Although, it would be his own home, so it wouldn't be trespassing. And it was a doll, so it wouldn't be murder,"

said Ougi-kun.

"But, even if you don't have proof, that doesn't mean you don't have a basis for that reasoning, right? When it comes to the uneven results of that doll, as you said yourself, Araragi-senpai. The difference between that balloon-art-like form and the roughly scribbled '*henohenomoheji*' face… You could think of it as the professor being better at sewing than she was at drawing, but you could also see it as

each task being assigned to a different person, right?"

"……"

Group work—division of labor.

Handmade.

"If so, then I wonder what the circumstances of that were. I don't mean to be presumptuous, but Araragi-senpai, shouldn't you start the investigation all over again? With this, it might even change the nuance behind the professor's disappearance."

"……"

I didn't think it would change anything.

If there was something to think about divided into parts, then we should also split up her disappearance into parts… Ougi-kun seemed to be pushing me towards the idea that the husband was involved in the professor's disappearance, but even in the unlikely event that that was the case, that was a job for the police to investigate.

In the first place, I didn't even have any investigatory power.

If it was an oddity phenomenon—if the "replacement child" phenomenon was involved, then as someone who's had some experience with the matter, I would not be reluctant to interject a few words of caution, but if not, then playing detective without discretion would be an illegal act.

Just as Ononoki-chan had admonished me, I should remember to rely on the police.

Or so I said, but an hour later, I was parked in the parking lot of Associate Professor Iesumi's apartment building, not near Naoetsu High's gymnasium, the venue of the girlsbas senior-junior social.

Without waiting for Kanbaru and Higasa-chan to return from their shopping trip, I left a message with Ougi-kun, turned the steering wheel as far as it could go, made a U-turn, and revisited the Iesumi residence.

It's because I nonchalantly act with such ingratitude that it's been hard to make friends even in university, but I'd have to wait until next time to get pampered by high school girls.

This was urgent.

No, I wasn't pretending to be a great detective who was caught up in intellectual curiosity and impulsively embarked on a guessing game… In fact, I was the exact opposite, the type of person who avoided murder scenes, even to the point of taking detours. I sounded like I was trying to be understanding, but I honestly didn't understand why Tsukihi would go hiking with her friends after hearing a rumor that a dead body was buried there.

What the hell was she doing?

Even if it wasn't a murder or a crime, the reason I dared to

revisit the apartment—where not only the act of child abuse but also the feud between husband and wife had appeared—was not out of intellectual curiosity but, dare I say it, the shield, as Ougi-chan… Ougi-kun had said.

In other words, self-protection.

It was something I'd remembered as I was speaking with Ougi-kun about the threefold locked room. Or rather, it was something I realized. Not the lock to the cage, which could easily be opened, nor the lock to the front door, where the husband might own a key—but the lock to the nursery, the second door.

As for that lock, it would not be surprising if the husband (who used to live in the house) knew where the key was, which means it wasn't necessarily a locked room… When I thought as much, I realized something.

I'd magnificently broken through it—a battering ram.

Ononoki-chan had kicked down the door, but wasn't that kind of yikes?

It had to be yikes.

Since I was entrusted with the key, I'd been confident that I wasn't trespassing this time, unlike the case with Benikujaku-chan, even though we hadn't been told we could destroy the room—the sight of the doll in the cage with its back stabbed must have confused me more than I thought, as I completely forgot to clean up the mess.

Neither the act of abusing a doll nor the act of murdering a doll was a crime, but the vandalism of the interior doors of another person's home certainly was.

Ononoki-chan…!

That girl had no hesitation in her destruction, or, being Yotsugi, it was like she had no other ideas[11]… With such a docile expression (or rather, no expression at all), she sure was good at destroying things without batting an eyelid… Speaking of which, in Benikujaku-chan's case, she'd also broken the window to the apartment without compunction.

She would probably answer proudly and without shame that she was a tool with that sort of function, but it always ended up being me that had to clean up afterwards.

It's like how, even though it's the heroes who defeat the demon king, it's the ordinary people who have to rebuild the world after it was destroyed in battle—no, this was not a story with that sort of lesson. This was simply a matter of a lack of discipline. After all, the original owner of that Ononoki-chan was that violent *onmyouji*… Not to mention, the current owner, Tsukihi, was not the type of person who lived for tidiness, to say the least.

Whatever it was, I hadn't thought about it enough.

It was quite the awful nursery, so the destroyed door fit right in, but even in a room that looked like the remnants of affection, that didn't mean that the door should also become remnants.

It may not be a problem or an incident at the moment, but if the disappearance of Associate Professor Iesumi continued for a long time, then someone, some party, would enter that room at some point —the management company, or even the police.

Although her whereabouts were unknown, it only meant that she did not show up at work and could not be contacted, not that she had been reported missing—the people that would likely file a missing person report, her family and parents, were probably all living in Switzerland. At the moment, the authorities did not seem to be taking any action, but even that had its limits.

If the rent wasn't paid on time, the apartment would have to be vacated at some point—and if that nursery was seen, that would cause a huge scandal. No doubt, it would be linked to her disappearance, and how would the destroyed door be seen then…?

Maybe, as a coward, I was being overly cautious—if the judiciary was going to arrest her for that level of destruction, Ononoki-chan would have been arrested a long time ago (she had once smashed the front door of the Araragi house to bits, as well as my sister).

I could assume that the person usually in charge of cleaning up after Ononoki-chan was the influential administrator of the specialists, Gaen Izuko-san—she was good at that sort of subterfuge, that "onee-san that knew everything".

Subterfuge against sabotage.

However, as my relations were currently cut off with that onee-san, I couldn't rely on that possibility anymore… Now that I'd realized, I had to do something about it myself.

If I hadn't realized it, I could have just let it go… Even though I was supposed to be having a change of pace having fun with high school girls, switching to going and covering up a crime was quite the rollercoaster.

If the rent is withdrawn from her bank account, even if she's not there, then the payments wouldn't be delayed right away (though it depended on her bank balance), but it was better to take action as soon as I could—you could say it was fortunate that I kept the key in my pocket instead of getting rid of it… Although, if I had just thrown it away, I wouldn't have even been able to consider performing a cover-up, and may have just given up. Actual crimes were probably exposed as a result of such unimportant lapses of memory…

Life just didn't go smoothly, did it.

But I was glad that I realized when Ononoki-chan was away…

A former vampire under surveillance, acting arbitrarily of my own accord, could get me killed yet again. Even though I was trying to clean up after Ononoki-chan's behavior, I wouldn't accept if Ononoki-chan were to clean me up, instead.

And so, after going to a home center and picking up carpentry tools meant for repairs along the way, I revisited the Iesumi residence.

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If I fixed the broken door quickly enough, perhaps I would make it in time for at least the afterparty of the girlsbas social—at least, that was the sweet-sounding plan I tried to devise, but that plan went awry.

Of course, I was making it sound like I was dying to attend that social, but I wasn't exactly a sociable person in the first place, so no matter what the purpose was, I wasn't exactly good with parties… When it came to the Fire Sisters' disbanding party, that troublesome guy who attended only reluctantly? That was me.

It was a party for middle school girls, huh… Well, I could do something about my social skills while I was still in college, but it seemed that I'd have to give up on attending the social altogether.

Because the door to the nursery was damaged beyond repair, so much so that I couldn't do anything about it—no, that wasn't the reason.

If that had been the case, then ultimately, I could've used my secret trick. I could have relied on the former legendary vampire Oshino Shinobu's—the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade's—"matter creation ability" to perfectly reconstruct the door from nothing… Although one condition was that I would have to wait until nightfall, but if so then I could simply have gone to the social while it was still daytime (maybe I did want to go after all?) and then come back to this room at night.

I would also have to pay compensation (in donuts)… However, that carefully thought-out plan ended up being useless. The state of that second door was such that it perfectly suited my independent spirit in wanting to resolve things on my own if at all possible… It was probably a good thing that Ononoki-chan kicked the door with her bare foot. If she had been wearing her usual boots, or if she had gone and used her "Unlimited Rulebook", then a hole could have been formed in the door itself. But the only damage that had been incurred was a faint footprint on the door and a few broken screws—even the hinges were mostly intact.

This was a level of DIY that I could manage with my skills—but then, why was it that I couldn't go and gleefully get pampered by high school girls?

The situation wasn't that complicated, but it was very important, so allow me to explain it step by step—about this development that was less of a situation and more of an anomaly.[12]

Even though I'd been given a key, that didn't mean that I had nothing to hide, so I snuck in through the back door of the building as

if I was trying to avoid the security cameras (which made me even more suspicious), and took the stairs instead of the elevator to the third floor, room 333—after all, with the homeowner missing, I didn't want anyone to think the kidnapper had come back to destroy evidence. I could say that I hadn't kidnapped anyone, but the facts were extremely close to that scenario, and that closeness could be a problem… My behavior was becoming more and more suspicious.

Well, it's impossible to avoid the cameras completely unless you become a complete vampire (then you won't be reflected in mirrors, so you'd be safe except for mirrorless cameras. Mirrorless was probably fine, too), so at some point I just had to take a "so-what" attitude… And apart from that, there were other precautions I needed to take.

Now that I'd arrived at the possibility that the separated husband was the "child murderer", I most certainly needed to be cautious that Room 333 might not necessarily be empty when I came… You might say that something like that was going a bit overboard, but I had to say that it was entirely possible for me to bump into the husband that had returned to the nursery.

It would be a terrible scene to be found in.

Even though I'd never gone through such a sad state of affairs with my actual girlfriend, why should I have to suffer like some married woman's secret lover?… However, since I, the breaker of the door (rather, an accomplice), had made my triumphant return here, it wouldn't be unusual if the husband were to return for the second time.

Not to mention the possibility of it being a situation like that Russian movie, *The Return*… The idea that the husband was the "child murderer" was, at present, simply my (and Ougi-kun's) own conjecture, so even if he weren't, it's conceivable that he might return home out of worry for his missing wife. In that case, we would not be of equal status. I would one-sidedly be guilty of breaking and entering.

It'd been tense when I'd opened the front door imagining a locked-up abused child, but it was also quite thrilling to open the door imagining that the father might be there.

So, after much deliberation, I decided to ring the intercom… And there was no answer. No reaction. Could I feel relief from that?

Nope, I should take precautions over relief.

Because there was one more development that I needed to take into consideration. That was the possibility that the heart of the problem, "the missing Associate Professor Iesumi herself", was simply holed up in her house—instead of disappearing or returning to Switzerland, what if she was just not contacting her work or friends, not leaving her apartment, and not using her answering machine?

It seemed like a classic trick that was often overlooked, but it was actually a stay-at-home policy that was possible because of modern society. Any necessities of life could be delivered through online shopping… Well, there would eventually be a limit to it, but even so, a person could easily spend their life like this for a week or so.

This was assuming she had the strength of mind to remain stubbornly silent even when university officials and friends were visiting her incessantly… Meanwhile, I was feeling so guilty after canceling on the social last-minute.

Oh yeah, once upon a time, I'd locked myself in the gymnasium storehouse with the intention of disappearing (please don't ask me for details), but a single message from Hanekawa was enough to shake me… So, if Associate Professor Iesumi was responsible for her own disappearance for whatever reason, I had to think that the possibility that she was hiding in her home was rather thin.

Even the possibility of exchanging greetings with the husband was clearly higher—but if I didn't properly simulate the pattern of reuniting with Associate Professor Iesumi after a few days, I figured I'd get flustered… Could I say something like, "I've come to return the key"?

Or should I just pretend to be a great detective and say something cool, like, "I knew you were here all along…"?

All the while, making an expression of understanding.

In any case, there was no answer when I pressed the intercom —from here on, my role was not to be a visitor, but to be a repairman.

Though it wasn't necessarily the home of a person I knew well, it was still my second visit to the house, so I wasn't going to get lost just from walking down the hallway of this apartment—no need to invoke the god of lost children—and I soon arrived at the nursery.

I should add that there was no sign of anyone from the living room or the first door in the hallway (most likely Associate Professor Iesumi's bedroom)—thus, the theory of the university professor having become a shut-in had all but disappeared. Rather, I should reflect upon my apparent carelessness in having left the door to that bedroom open the other day.

The second door was more than simply left open… but the extent of the destruction was such that it could be restored to its original state by hand, as I'd already mentioned.

Let's just rejoice in that.

However, the thought of rejoicing didn't pass through my mind at all, because it wasn't just the door to the nursery that had been broken.

"…Huh?"

The big problem was—the door to the cage in the corner of the nursery was broken. The other day, when I viewed this room with its blackout curtains drawn, the door of the cage had been properly bolted—but now, it was broken in a way that was almost irreparable.

It was as if it had been a cage to confine some sort of monster, and that monster forcibly pried open the iron fence from the inside… It had been warped like candy. Rather than saying the door had been broken, it was more like the door had been melted—but, needless to say, there were no monsters inside that cage.

And.

The abused doll that had been stabbed in the back with a fruit knife had also disappeared from the cage. Like her maker, she had gone missing—

Hm? Hmm? Hmmm?

What was going on here?

I decided to temporarily set my toolbox down on the nursery's floor… This might have been a mistake, as any sensible person would have turned on his heel immediately.

But, being a considerable fool, I couldn't help but inspect the cage. Without thinking, I chose to think—well, well, let's at least calm down.

I figured that someday I would fix my bad habit of staying in place when surprised… If I were to assess the scene objectively, it might look as if the doll escaped from the cage of its own volition, but I couldn't take that as fact just yet.

No need to panic.

I only got such a first impression because I happened to know an extreme example of an autonomously moving doll, a corpse doll… But as long as we followed common sense, dolls did not break out of prison.

Just as everyone knows well.

So, if there was someone that destroyed this cage in the past few days, it should be easily assumed that it was not the work of the trapped doll, but of someone who visited the room during that time.

It may look like it had been pried open from the inside, but maybe that was just how it looked, you know?

It appeared that Associate Professor Iesumi was not at home, and so I could make any number of hypotheses that she could have returned home temporarily after her disappearance—and when she did, perhaps she took that handmade doll with a profound level of emotional attachment with her. A similar hypothesis could easily be made in the case of the husband.

Maybe he regretted stabbing the doll that his wife "adored"… Um, maybe he took it to be repaired?

It could even be surmised that he took the doll to destroy evidence after his wife's disappearance, just as I had visited the Iesumi residence to do so.

…But, was that really the case?

Even if it wasn't the Iesumi couple, assuming a human being took that creepy doll… Who in the world would go so far as bending an iron cage to do that?

Even the *shikigami* and god of destruction who kicked in the second door, Ononoki-chan, would probably unbolt the cage when opening it… It was a simple mechanism that could be opened by even

a kindergartener who had never seen something so ancient as a bolt lock in their life.

Yes, unless you were a three-year-old that hadn't yet entered kindergarten…

First off, it was a cage meant for animals. It wasn't some run-of-the-mill toy. What kind of force, and at what angle, would cause an iron rod to twist in such a ridiculous way?

At least with my arm strength, it would be impossible. Of course, in my vampire days, neither iron nor diamond would be anything special, but with my current arm strength…

But really, what about it?

No matter how innocent I pretended to be, I'd traveled through time, and I'd both destroyed and saved a parallel world… It made no sense to be so distraught over the escape of a doll.

But… even the "precedent", the corpse doll Ononoki-chan, needed to be used for a hundred years in order to become a *tsukumogami*, right? And for her to move so freely and openly, Kagenui Yozuru and Teori Tadatsuru had been burdened with the incomprehensible curse of "not being able to walk on the ground"—Ononoki-chan was a corpse doll with that much time and compensation needed.

For a stuffed doll, which had only been a stuffed doll last week, to escape from prison by force on my next visit… Was it really so simple?

"…No."

It wasn't just a stuffed doll.

It was handmade, made in place of one's child.

It had been hurt.

And it had been stabbed in the back—even though it hadn't been long, the passion put into it was certainly not superficial. It was a level of passion that would make you think, "If that much wasn't enough, then how much passion would you even need?"

I would even venture to say that there was the possibility that my visit to the nursery was a trigger… It was entirely possible that I, with my wealth of experience in strange things, had some influence over it. In the same way that the Kitashirahebi Shrine, which used to be a gathering place for "bad things", played such a role with the *jagirinawa*—perhaps I had become a walking attraction for those "bad things".

A magnificent self-made problem.

In order to prevent this from happening, Gaen-san should have completely sealed away the influence of the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, but I suppose even the most skilled of experts could make mistakes.

If that was the case, then I couldn't help but feel responsible… If I was not only the trigger for the disappearance of Associate Professor Iesumi, but also the trigger for the jailbreak of the abused doll, then—no joke—I couldn't complain if I was blasted to death by Ononoki-chan.

That girl was always no joke.

She was always a ghost story.[13]

However, even so, this situation was no longer something that I could cover up… I had no choice but to report to Ononoki-chan, even if it meant preparing myself to get killed. Unlike the second door, the only way to fix this warped, twisted cage back to normal would be to call in Shinobu, but if there really was a leak in the influence of that loli slave, then we couldn't easily rely on vampire powers.

I was at a loss…

In any case, whether it was my fault or not, I couldn't afford not to search for the stuffed doll that escaped from the cage, and if it came to that, then the help of a professional like Ononoki-chan was essential—as I thought that, I approached the cage and looked inside from above, just as I'd done the other day.

No matter what direction I looked in from, there was no space to hide in an empty cage… Even the fruit knife was gone.

Could it have escaped while stabbed?

If that was the case, that fugitive would be dealing with a serious injury… Could I think of it like that? Or was I empathizing too much with a lump of cloth?

But it's because of the emotional investment that that doll—let's call it the Iie-chan doll—was able to escape from the cage, wasn't it?

"Um… But, if it escaped, then where did it go?"

I voiced the question that naturally came to mind.

Of course, I would go look for it together with Ononoki-chan—well, I highly doubt it ran to the children's welfare center—but what I was referring to came before that.

I had come in through the front door. Using the key, I'd unlocked the door.

In other words, the door had been locked—if the Iie-chan doll had left from the front, from that doorway, then wasn't it strange that the door was locked?

Unlike the husband, it was hard to believe the stuffed doll possessed a key… Not many parents would entrust their keys to a three-year-old, even if the child was alive and not abused.

To examine the problem from all angles, even assuming that the Iie-chan doll still had the key… If "she" couldn't figure out how to

open a bolt lock, how could she possibly know how to close a dimple lock?

In other words, roughly speaking, the Iie-chan doll didn't go out the front door… Then, could it have escaped by breaking the glass of a window somewhere? But when I entered the room, the air felt the same as when I'd been here the other day, and it didn't seem like it had been ventilated in any way…

"…It may have escaped from the cage, but."

Perhaps, the Iie-chan doll.

Was still in this apartment?

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Surprisingly enough, I hadn't been able to quickly deduce from the warped frame of the cage the possibility that the Iie-chan doll's escape had just taken place—I hadn't imagined that the Iie-chan doll could still be at home, or even that she could still be hiding in this very nursery.

While there was certainly no place to hide in the empty cage, when the playing field consisted of the entire house, there would be plenty of hiding places for a stuffed doll the size of a three-year-old.

I was suddenly very nervous.

It happened at quite the accelerated rate, especially taking into account the fact that the fruit knife was also missing—a doll capable of irreversibly destroying a cage, while also wielding a knife? That was more than enough of a threat.

It was threatening, and it was terrifying.[14]

To think that it was not Associate Professor Iesumi but the Iie-chan doll that was holed up inside this apartment… Even though it was able to escape from the cage, did it stay in here because it couldn't figure out how to get past the front door? At the size of a three-year-old, it wouldn't be able to reach the thumbturn, either… If it had the strength to bend bars of iron, then it would be strong enough to break a window, but the question was whether or not a three-year-old understood what the substance of glass was.

For example, adult dogs were said to have the intelligence of three-year-olds, but supposedly they often ran headfirst into window panes… It was a bit different from the concept of the mirror self-recognition test, but it wouldn't be a surprise if the Iie-chan doll couldn't conceive of breaking that transparent glass. In the same way you can't break air, which is transparent and not visible… Damn, this was making me glance around for no reason.

To think that after just barely registering the fact that a doll had escaped, I would be devising plans for my own escape… However, if I wasn't being too cowardly and the Iie-chan doll really was still inside this apartment, then you could say that there was a successful lockdown in place.

In specialist terms, a barrier.

If I were to open the front door to escape, it would result in the barrier being lifted… Of course, if I closed the door immediately and locked it tightly, then I could probably get away with it, but that couldn't be guaranteed… It was even possible that the escapee was waiting to take advantage of when I would make my escape.

So here I was, feeling a sense of responsibility and trying to

figure out a way to settle the matter of this barrier… Although, if the doll had already escaped ages ago, this would just be tilting at windmills.

It wouldn't exactly be a reprehensible double standard if a stuffed doll that could pry open an iron cage with its monstrous strength could also pass through walls.

Even though I knew that very well, I still had to do whatever I could… Because if I let the Iie-chan doll leave the house right now, I had no idea where it would go off to—well, no, I did have an idea.

My idea was that the abused "three-year-old daughter" would go looking for the missing "mother" or perhaps the estranged "father"—with unexpected superpowers, that is.

That's why I had to stop it.

If it was still in here, I couldn't let it escape.

If only I had the skill to detect oddities like a radar… If it were Shinobu, she could probably do it… However, as far as I could tell from my glancing around, it seemed it wasn't still in the nursery. I also astutely made sure to look at the ceiling, but there weren't any mobiles hanging from it.

It wasn't as if I looked that carefully at the living room or the associate professor's bedroom when I arrived, but thinking about it, the most suspicious room had to be that third room, right? It seemed that the time had finally come for me to muster up the courage to enter into the estranged husband's room—a room I had not yet seen. I took one last glance at the crib to see if the doll would actually turn out to have been sleeping peacefully there, but of course, it was empty, just like the cage.

No, strictly speaking, it wasn't "just like" the cage.

Without exaggerating, the cage was completely empty, but the crib was a bed, so naturally there was a blanket inside—a blanket?

"!! Urk—!"

By the time I thought of it, it was already too late.

The blanket that flew out from the crib wrapped around my neck —with an intense power that could even bend iron.

I'd been calling it a lump of cloth—in other words, looking down on the fact that it was supposed to be a doll—and it was as if I was receiving retribution for it. Even though it didn't even need a change in thinking to see that the Iie-chan doll, which had been formed like a balloon animal, had *untied itself* and hid itself in the crib.

I promised to write a letter of reflection, about the length of this book, for my lack of consideration and inadequacy at a later date, but right now, considering the situation he was currently experiencing, what Araragi Koyomi should be writing was a letter of warning.

I wasn't saying this out of spite towards being strangled by a blanket… But if it had the ability to arbitrarily return from the shape of a three-year-old to the shape of a flat blanket, then why even bother bending the cage to escape from it?

It could just slip through the gap between the bars.

By untying itself and thinning out.

It was plausible to assume that it didn't do so because it *couldn't* do so at the time… It was only after escaping that it acquired the ability to "blanket-ify", if you will.

Should I say that it learned—or should I say that it grew up, like a three-year-old would?

Its growth rate, its growth potential.

As an oddity, its danger level was way too high—even though I was "former" in more ways than one, the fact that it could entrap the thrall of the King of Oddities in such a skillful way was all the more impressive.

It was probably reading too much into it to say that the doll was waiting all this time for a guy to arrive, who could teach it how to open the door—I thought I'd been plenty nervous, but it seemed I didn't have enough of a sense of urgency.

So it would not have been a surprise if I'd broken my neck here, and that would have been extremely appropriate as retribution—but it was only by sheer luck that I was here now, speaking the words of a disgraced loser.

And, if you could believe it, I was now chewing on that good fortune inside a cage—yes, the very cage that the Iie-chan doll had been confined in.

At present, I was being confined.

I'd been grabbed by the neck by an old-looking magic blanket and thrown into the cage—and, whether or not that was also something it had learned, it freed me just before I was about to faint,

wrapped itself around the pried-open part of the cage, and pulled it back into its original shape.

Perhaps by coincidence or perhaps on purpose, it also twisted the bar of the bolt lock so that it was all warped and twisted—thus, I was rendered unable to escape from the cage.

I'd been locked up.

The blanket, having successfully neutralized its prey, fluttered out of the nursery without giving me so much as another glance.

After that, judging from the sounds coming from down the hallway, the blanket seemed to have opened the front door and left… The situation I had feared had easily become a reality.

If it could become a flying blanket, then the problem of its height was easily resolved, and the barrier turned out to be one that could simply be unlocked… If it had been locked in the room because it couldn't figure out how to turn the thumbturn, then I had broken that seal when I arrived to destroy evidence.

Oops.

When I came in, I really should have locked the door properly, and even set the chain lock…

At any rate… The escape of an abused doll, huh.

It was like I could kind of understand how it felt. Of course you'd want to run away after being locked in a cage this small, right?

The sheer number of things I'd have to think about after this made me feel fed up, but first things first, I had to figure out a way out of this cage… The bolt lock had been twisted and tied to be immobile, and pulling off a stunt like warping the iron bars was impossible for (the current) me… Which meant that, good grief, I would have to come up with my own locked room trick.

How thrilling.

It had been a year since I was last confined.

Last summer, I had once been trapped in an abandoned building by Senjougahara Hitagi, who I had just started dating—at that time, she had prepared food and drinks for me, but I couldn't exactly expect anything like that now.

The blanket had escaped, and the homeowner was missing.

I could carelessly act as if I'd managed to survive, but at this rate, I was going to die of hunger in three days.

It was easy to say that people who have never been abused would never know what it felt like to be abused, but I never thought I would experience the same thing as the Iie-chan doll…

Was that also on purpose? Was it revenge?

If so, then all I could say was that it was taking revenge on the wrong person. But that didn't mean I could allow it to take revenge on the right person, either.

I had to become an escape artist.

Fortunately, I had two rough plans in mind.

Plan number one… Wake Shinobu up. The day was still long, but Shinobu wasn't exactly a vampire but the remnants of a vampire, so daytime activities were still possible with some negotiation.

Plan number two… Call Kanbaru or Ougi-kun over LINE. Fortunately, the modern convenience that was my cell phone had been neither stolen nor destroyed—Ougi-kun already knew about this apartment, and if I asked for help from those two that were familiar with oddity phenomena (especially since they appeared to be working together on some suspicious activity), they could not only help me break out of this cage, but also with the subsequent search for the Iie-chan doll.

Neither plan was that bad, but the common disadvantage that both plan one and plan two had was that they were both "super uncool"… If any of them saw me locked up in an animal cage like this, I would never be respected again, as a master or as an upperclassman.

I'd be looked down upon for the rest of my life.

Or even just abandoned.

You'd probably say something like, "I couldn't care less about your trivial sense of pride," but without that trivial sense of pride, my sense of duty towards capturing the Iie-chan doll that I'd let escape would also vanish.

If I had to resort to calling someone out from their precious daytime nap or from a big senior-junior social, I had to at least escape from the cage by myself.

Seriously, I wanted to cry.

I'd experienced hell and I'd experienced nightmares, I'd traveled through time, I'd destroyed and saved a parallel world, and now I was struggling to figure out how to get out of an animal cage… But, well, in the end, it was just a cage for wildlife. Powerless before the wisdom of humanity—well, I wasn't exactly wildlife, but one of those wise humans that had ended up being confined by a blanket, but there was no need to be vain about it in this unwinnable scenario. In fact, Shinobu had seen many more shameful things in my life…

Sure enough, thanks to some sort of divine providence, there was currently a toolbox full of do-it-yourself tools in this nursery. Some idiot must have brought it in order to repair the door in order to hide evidence.

But what that idiot was about to do now was the exact opposite—using the tools to break down a door. You could compare this situation to the reality that technology developed to enrich people's lives could be used as weapons of war in the future, but

putting that aside.

I reached for the toolbox through the gap in the iron bars, but alas, it was too far—and my legs fit only up to my knees. Well, thighs are called thighs because they are thick. So I decided to use my head a bit and take off my trousers.[15]

Not because I thought it would make my thighs slimmer, but because I was going to use my trousers as a lasso—first, I would take my pants out of the cage, hold the left and right cuffs with my hands through the gaps in the iron bars, and flap the trousers in the direction of the toolbox.

It was on the third try that the toolbox was successfully caught in the crotch area—all I had to do was pull it in.

If I stopped to think about what I was doing in someone else's house with my pants down, it would be a defeat for me… But it was still too early to think that I was done.

This was where the real work began.

Now, in the toolbox, which was on sale for 2,980 yen, there was… Yes, a coping saw! Just what I needed! That was what I cheered to myself, but unfortunately, it was not exactly what I needed—I only realized after I started, but it would probably take me around five years to cut the iron fence with a coping saw.

And it wasn't like I could just cut a single bar and escape. That would be the way of a true escape artist.

Then, could I use a screwdriver to dismantle the cage…? That didn't sound so easy without the assembly instructions, either… And then, it hit me.

At the bottom of the toolbox was a hammer.

DIY.

Destroy It Yourself.

Five minutes later, I succeeded in performing my trick to escape from the locked room—a quicker escape than waking Shinobu up during the day or calling Kanbaru or Ougi-kun on the phone, as it turned out.

According to my calculations, I hadn't even been trapped here for half an hour, but still, there was a real sense of liberation.

I almost wanted to express my joy through song.

With that, I wondered what the Iie-chan doll was feeling now… Right, I couldn't waste time basking in my sense of liberation.

I had to go after the blanket that had escaped.

It couldn't have gone very far yet—clinging to those thoughts, I ran out the front door, but I couldn't find the blanket or the doll anywhere.

Then, could it have figured out how to use the elevator? Or perhaps, the fire escape—no, it was a flying blanket, so I suppose I

could skip those formalities. The corridor in front of the entrance faced the sky, so once it was out, the Iie-chan doll was free to go.

I tried to lean over the railing to get a better look, but I didn't see any blanket dancing in the wind… It didn't seem there was any chance of bringing out the punny phrase, "The futon flew away!"[16], that I had prepared for when I found it.

Still, I had to keep going without losing to my despair—urged on by my frustration, I ran down the stairs. It was not for the sake of being cautious towards the security cameras, like I had done on my way up, but the result of impatience that prevented me from waiting for the elevator. I could at least say that I was rational enough not to dive from the third floor into the parking lot.

And then, with no particular destination in mind, I jumped into my New Beetle and drove off—or so I planned, but…

"Whoa!"

I yelled.

Despite the despair I was facing, what leaked out was not an expression of grief, but an exclamation of astonishment—the four tires of my beloved car had all gone flat.

Or I should say, they had been forced to go flat… It looked like the thick rubber had been torn apart with brute force, leaving the wheel's rim almost bare.

I'd been trying to go anywhere while chasing after the flying blanket, but this meant I could go nowhere—how clever of you, Iie-chan doll.

Fifteen minutes ago, it had carelessly confined me without taking away my cell phone, but now, it had obtained the judgment to precisely take away my means of transportation—I had no idea how it was able to determine that the New Beetle was my car, but that three-year-old sure was growing up fast.

I was excited for this one's future prospects.

Its method was more primitive and strong-handed than I was thinking.

The Iie-chan doll did not puncture my New Beetle's tires knowing that it was my car. Rather, it punctured the tires of every car in the parking lot—an indiscriminate brute force operation.

I hadn't checked, but maybe even bicycles had suffered the same fate?

It wasn't the work of an intellectual criminal.

However, I could still feel its growth in how it limited the destruction to only the tires—it certainly wasn't as if the Iie-chan doll had grown desperate and was rampaging in hysterics.

It was sloppy, but it was focused.

But still, in order to slash open the rubber of a car's tires, I felt like it would take more force than twisting the rods of an iron cage… Could it be growing in terms of power on top of its learning ability?

Or, more reasonably, it may have just used the knife—but where did that fruit knife go? Was it being carried around wrapped in that blanket right about now…? Like how vicious criminals carried their blades.

Anyway, after my New Beetle was destroyed, I promptly hotwired the neighboring car and accelerated straight to full throttle —or not. No such development occurred. It ended without me having to become a car thief… But this was no longer the time to be talking about destroying evidence and other small things.

I was no longer in a situation that could be easily contained without asking for help from Gaen-san—now that a moving doll and a flying blanket had appeared, which could only be construed as oddities, and a large-scale destructive act (involving all the residents of this apartment building) had been carried out at this open parking lot, not behind closed doors.

It hadn't caused a commotion just yet, but there could have been a witness. And even if I wanted to use Shinobu's matter-creation skill to fix all the car tires, I had no way of knowing what kind of tires they originally had…

As for the casualties…

I'd had my neck strangled and my entire self thrown into a cage, but maybe I would avoid mentioning that… The theory that abused children become abusive parents had been raised by none other than Associate Professor Iesumi herself, but what in the world might happen to a doll that was abused and stabbed in the back by humans?

Did it just run away, or did it opt to get revenge against its "abusive parent" and "murderous parent"—either way, I'd better get out of here, too, for now.

I didn't want anyone to catch me here and misinterpret this situation as some college student taking pride in their vandalism… But what should I do now?

Move indoors or into a shadow and bring out Shinobu? Make a call to Kanbaru or Ougi-kun and ask for help? That was what I'd thought of while I was still in the cage… But after having been given the runaround by the Iie-chan doll and having my precious car destroyed, I'd cooled off a bit and changed my mind.

It wasn't that I was so stupefied by the extent of the damage that I lost my motivation… If anything, I felt more and more like I had to do something about it.

And because of that feeling, I thought of a more appropriate person to ask for help than Shinobu, or the Kanbaru/Ougi-kun pair… In my high school days, I'd relied too much on Shinobu to the extent that I'd ended up going to hell, so I should take care not to drag that young girl out as long as there wasn't a battle about to unfold.

As for Kanbaru and Ougi-kun, while they may be connected to oddities (or even an oddity himself), that didn't necessarily mean they were professionals… I didn't want to involve them in a mission where their lives could be in danger. Plus, they'd managed to come this far to the point of having a big senior-junior social—but towards the beginning of the year, the situation had been quite vicious… I didn't want to disturb them. Kanbaru had her own battles to fight.

So, even while knowing the risk of being rebuked and perhaps even killed for acting of my own accord, it was once again time for me to rely on a professional.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

A doll for a doll… And for an oddity, a specialist.

Ononoki-chan may ultimately be a specialist in immortal oddities, but it was hard to say that the Iie-chan doll was simply a "replacement child" at this point—if you thought of that blanket as a kind of reincarnation of Iie-chan, then it would just barely be included in the area of expertise of that tween girl, right?

Even discounting the risk of being killed, it was honestly not very wise to create a new debt to a professional, so it was a little hard to go to a specialist for help… However, when I realized I would have to rely on Ononoki-chan to act as a bridge to Gaen-san (who'd currently cut contact with me) in order to take care of the mess in the parking lot, I found my resolve.

Then, the next problem.

Where might Ononoki-chan be right now?

I thought I'd been lucky when I didn't find her riding in the back seat of my car, but now that this happened, I almost wished she would take up permanent residence there. If she wasn't working, then maybe she'd gone back to Tsukihi's room by now? If that's the case, I would have to take public transportation back home—but wait.

What if.

This was a total shot in the dark—but what if she was at the home of her good friend Nade*kou*, Sengoku Nadeko?

She had indeed been at Nade*kou*'s place. In my opinion, this was the worst possible location—because Araragi Koyomi was not to approach the Sengoku residence.

By no means was I faithfully upholding my promise to that con man. Rather, I was upholding a promise made to myself—you could even call it an oath.

Well, in an emergency like this, I shouldn't even be talking about oaths, but this matter transcended the issue of my vanity.

Even taking into account how sensitive I was on the matter—more pragmatically, if I ran into Sengoku again, and she ended up becoming a god again… Wouldn't that be a bit of a problem for the townspeople here? In order to make sure that didn't happen, even Ononoki-chan was visiting the Sengoku residence quite frequently… So, after being at a loss, allow me to tell you exactly what I did.

Although, since there wasn't much time—I would do it at a brisk pace.

I boarded the bus that came to the bus stop, and while on board, I first texted Tsukihi to check if Ononoki-chan had returned to her room… Having completely forgotten that she was out on a hike, looking for a dead body.

However, as expected of the former advisor of the Fire Sisters, my dear sister had already pinpointed the location of her missing doll.

"Well☆actually☆it☆seems☆like☆Nadeko☆chan☆has☆her☆right

Was it a trend to put a meteor shower in your text messages? In that case, the influencer must be Higasa-chan… My new friend had some incredible clout. How reliable… Maybe I should ask Higasa-chan for help.

Of course I couldn't do that.

But even the ex-advisor didn't seem to believe that her stuffed doll used its own two feet to jump to the house of her best friend… When Ononoki-chan went to visit Sengoku, she certainly stayed for a long time.

I would've preferred if she'd been on some other business.

After pondering for a while, I decided to take a measure that would not exactly leave me free from criticism… I would be deceiving not just Ononoki-chan, but Sengoku, as well.

It was wrong, but it was a harmless lie. Please overlook it.

I used my brotherly influence to order Tsukihi to text Sengoku—with the contents of the text message as follows.

"I'm☆gonna☆come☆over☆and☆play!☆☆☆☆☆☆"

If there was but one reason for Ononoki-chan to make an early

return from the Sengoku residence, it would be that Sengoku's best friend, Tsukihi, was coming over—of course, it was impossible for Tsukihi, who was currently in the middle of hiking, to actually go to the Sengoku residence, and that embodiment of insolence would never be mannerly enough to let someone know in advance that they would be coming over. But who would ignore that rare, once-in-a-lifetime emergency alert announcing a *kaiju* attack?

And that was how it went.

"Listen, *oni* onii-chan. After we settle this case, I'm going to kill you."

Her manner of speech had changed.

My death sentence had finally been confirmed, but regardless, I succeeded in meeting up with Ononoki-chan in my room at the Araragi residence—my first success in a while. Even though I was going to die.

"Can't you tell the difference between a lie you should tell and a lie you shouldn't? I guess you can't. It was the same when you saved Heartunderblade last spring break, and when you fought me, and when you made Mayoi-nee-san pass on—"

She was rehashing all of my past wrongdoings.

But I had no choice but to kneel and listen.

"But still, to think you would betray my expectations by doing something like this in the middle of my game of Twister with Nade*kou*."

"Twister… Doesn't seem like she would've been able to win against a corpse doll."

Since she could, quite literally, twist her body.

Although, at this rate, it was probably my body that would end up getting twisted.

"I'm okay with the fact that you deceived me. But I absolutely cannot forgive the fact that you deceived Nade*kou*. You deserve to die. I'll make that geriatric suck your blood and raise your immortality level so I can kill you again and again."

Geriatric…

Her character setting was reverting to its initial stages.

However, more than anything, that sense of camaraderie she held towards Sengoku was something to envy.[17]

She was Senbou Nadeko.

"Nevertheless, Araragi Tsukihi not showing up after saying she was coming is a very happy feeling, the best lie of all lies, so you'll be spared with only an instant death. So spit it out. What was the reason you wanted me to kill you so badly?"

Though she was as expressionless and monotonous as always, I could really sense her fury now… Well, she probably actually was

furious.

I didn't know what sort of relationship Ononoki-chan built with Sengoku, but, uh, I didn't think she'd get this angry…

I didn't want to sound patronizing, but didn't I buy you ice cream and stuff, too? I've spent about five thousand yen on you in total, you know?

"Or are you saying your friendship is worth more than five thousand yen?"

"This guy is talking just like Kaiki onii-chan."

She came at me with the maximum level of abuse. But I'll readily accept it.

I didn't want an instant death, so I told Ononoki-chan the whole story of my bizarre experience in Associate Professor Iesumi's apartment—I didn't think she would forgive me just because I included it, but I made sure to include my shameful account of being locked in a cage for animals, which I would have preferred to skip.

If she could at least be satisfied with that…

"…I see. So it's like that."

Rather than killing me midway through my account, she listened to the very end before nodding—though the atmosphere of her total rage had not yet subsided.

"When you say like that, like what?"

"Like you really are Araragi Tsukihi's big brother."

Was that also the maximum level of abuse?

But no, it seemed she was being serious.

"Perhaps I should add a new interpretation of looking at the *shide-no-dori*. I'd described it as assimilation or hijacking, but I can see the resemblance between you two beyond just simple blood relations. Thinking about it, there are no precedents for phoenixes becoming siblings with vampires, so I guess it would be more unnatural if there were no irregularities."

"……"

Was the mess I made somehow connected to redeeming Tsukihi in their eyes? This was quite the unexpected development—no, no matter how Ononoki-chan interpreted it, at the end of the day, as long as there was no change in what Kagenui-san thought, the phoenix's safety wasn't guaranteed… Still, I felt like I had made a step forward.

Though I had decided that I would die today, maybe Tsukihi would be able to survive.

"Basically, instead of being *oni* onii-chan, you're the phoenix's onii-chan. It was a mystery last summer when onee-chan decided to let Araragi Tsukihi go, but perhaps she anticipated something like this."

"? It's hard to believe she thought something like this… I thought she just let her go because of how pitiful I was…"

"Who said you could object?"

She flatly denied my freedom of speech.

Scary, scary.

Her anger probably wouldn't let up for a while now… I really should've just asked Shinobu for help instead of thinking about it so much.

But there was no going back now.

As her brother, I was curious about this new interpretation of the *shide-no-dori* (it wasn't necessarily all good; in the end, it could end up being the reason why my sister would become subject to another purge), but, rather than the phoenix, the abused doll was more urgent right now.

"Please, Ononoki-chan. It's just as I said. Just as I said—it's kind of a mess. It's my fault that the Iie-chan doll escaped—I want to prevent any more damage from occurring. Maybe we can't assume that the flying blanket is specifically targeting the missing Associate Professor Iesumi or the estranged husband, but couldn't we at least warn them ahead of time?"

"You're such a nice person, *oni* onii-chan."

Her sarcasm was scathing.

Not to mention, it was a line I hadn't exactly taken well when Hanekawa had once said that.

"It's a shock to me that you're still a good person even after becoming a fine adult."

"…I'm not a fine adult at all. I'm still only a first-year in college."

"You'll probably say the same thing even at a hundred years old. Like, 'I'm still only a hundred years old'."

It wasn't very convincing when a *tsukumogami* that had been used for a hundred years told me that… Well, it had just been decided that I would die at nineteen years old, so it didn't seem like I would be able to live to a hundred.

I was in dire straits.

It was like hell's mountain of needles.

"All right. I'll take it on. This job. No matter how you forcefully interpret it, it's not really my area of expertise, but I'll accept the incomprehensible and forced theory laid out by *oni* onii-chan, or for short, *oni*i-chan, that it was reincarnated as a representative doll and is thus immortal."

"Ah… Is that so?"

Even though she'd been so angry, it was a surprise to hear that she agreed to cooperate with me… Was she showing pity because I

was on the verge of death? Like a last meal for prisoners on death row? Although, if this was the attitude of a professional not influenced by emotions, then I would've made no mistake in choosing Ononoki-chan as my partner… But it probably wasn't that simple.

It was true that, no matter how hard you tried to spin it, this was not Ononoki Yotsugi's area of expertise—but perhaps, because they were both living dolls, Ononoki-chan couldn't ignore the Iie-chan doll.

But, no matter the reason, there was nothing more reassuring—it finally felt like I had found a ray of light. Even if that ray of light was the last light of a fading candle.

"Th… Thank you. That helps a lot, Ononoki-chan."

"It would be pretty stylish if I quoted Oshino onii-chan's famous line here, but *oni* onii-chan, you can't even be helped on your own. You can't be saved."

"…Haha. Hehehe."

"And now you're laughing. But when it comes to work, *oni* onii-chan, you better be prepared to pay the cost."

So the process here was exactly the same as with Oshino… I'd shouldered a debt of up to five million yen to that middle-aged guy in a Hawaiian shirt, but I never thought I would find myself paying off a loan like that even as a college student… Did student discounts still apply for college students? My beloved Oikura Sodachi was living her college life under the debt known as student loans, but I didn't expect our lives to align in such a way. I guess the inseparable bond between childhood friends will go on forever.

As I listened with trepidation, thinking that I might have to sell my New Beetle in the worst-case scenario, Ononoki-chan said,

"Then, five thousand yen. Please and thank you,"

and named the price.

"Eh? Five thousand yen? What's with that sudden drop in prices… Was it deflation, or something?"

"It's a friend discount. My friendship with *oni* onii-chan is worth that much, I suppose… Plus, it's not that I don't appreciate the fact that you went to fix the door that I kicked down. Don't worry, I'll let you pay in installments—pay me a hundred yen a day."

"……"

It didn't seem like her anger had subsided just yet.

But it seemed my execution date had been postponed by fifty days.

From there, Ononoki-chan's movements became exceedingly swift—compared to an easygoing person like me, it was a marked difference.

Completely.

She'd sarcastically described me as nice and as a good person, but if I really were nice and a good person, I would have started a full-scale search for Associate Professor Iesumi the moment she disappeared.

Especially because it wasn't an elementary school student, a middle school girl, or a high school girl who had disappeared, but a university professor, a "fine adult", who had disappeared of her own volition—I'd made the decision that I shouldn't recklessly chase after her. But that decision made out of a sense of false wisdom was nothing more than an adult decision.

An adult decision that only a child would make.

It might be necessary for me to reflect on my high school failures, but that was different from completely denying the rash behavior of those days.

This time, it was different.

Well, there were some circumstances that prevented me from doing what I did back then, like being under Ononoki-chan's supervision and my relationship with Shinobu, but just for today, I'll make a little comeback.

It wasn't a redo.

It was for the sake of a completely new start.

"*Oni* onii-chan, your straightforward assumption that the abused doll that escaped is going after the 'parents' is, well, probably right. There's nothing else to do."

"……"

"So, I'm largely in favor of the plan to anticipate the doll and protect them. We'll need to be on guard for the abused doll's growth rate, but right now, since it's just been born, it should be possible to keep it in check."

"Yeah… The question is, how will we be able to find the Iesumi couple before the Iie-chan doll? Each of them has their whereabouts unknown, after all."

"The same can be said for the abused doll. Even for that abused doll, the parents have gone missing. However, that couple is essentially like the doll's 'biological parents', after all. It wouldn't be strange for it to have a search power, like a homing instinct, that will let it find them quickly."

Like *3000 Leagues in Search of Mother*?

Well, a skill to pinpoint the location of one's target wasn't something particularly unusual for oddities… This example went in the opposite direction, but when I was a thrall of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, she would always be aware of my location.

"Whatever. If it has a searching power, then what we have is researching power."

"Researching?"

"It's my forte, you see. Investigation. Although you always talk about me as if I'm some destructive force, *oni* onii-chan."

She's holding a grudge, huh.

It made me want to admit defeat.[18]

Although, to be precise, I'd called her a god of destruction.

"Well, sure, Ononoki-chan, your ability to research is one of your specialties on par with your 'Unlimited Rulebook', but if her colleagues and friends couldn't find her after doing everything they could, what could we do…?"

"I find it hard to believe that everyone really did everything they could to look for her—they probably felt the same way as you, because it was the disappearance of an adult… But even if that goes for the wife, it's not necessarily the same for the husband, right?"

"Hm?"

"We can still find the husband. They may have been separated, but it's not like he's gone missing. He may be living independently of his wife, but it's not like he's completely cut himself off from the rest of the world… We should still be able to get in touch with him."

I see…

I'd ended up thinking of the two of them as a set, but if I were to approach them separately, then it made more sense to go for the husband rather than Associate Professor Iesumi herself. Unlike Associate Professor Iesumi, whose roots were in Switzerland, it should be relatively easier to find traces of him.

If we assumed that Associate Professor Iesumi returned to Switzerland, then the husband was more likely to be in danger right now… After all, it would take days for that flying blanket to get all the way to Switzerland, right?

"Although, I'm reluctant to agree with the theory suggested by Oshino Ougi, the one that said that it was the husband that stabbed the abused doll in the back."

Oh… It was Ononoki-chan's first comment about the knife stabbed in the back of the Iie-chan doll.

It was true that there was still the possibility the husband wasn't involved in this matter at all… If he wasn't involved in the

abuse of the Iie-chan doll, then there was no reason for the Iie-chan doll to target him, which meant it would sadly be pointless to look for him and protect him.

"Well, as a stuffed doll, it may have considered the separation and leaving the house as 'abuse' from the father, so it wouldn't be completely pointless."

"Eh…? If that's considered abuse, then wouldn't there be no end to it?"

"There is no end to it. Why do you think there are limits to abuse?"

"……"

The separation of a couple should be within the scope of basic human rights, so accusing them of abuse was excessive no matter how you looked at it… Although, if I were the child of that couple, I guess I would still want to complain.

Especially if it were to happen before I could understand what was going on.

"Also, there's the possibility that the missing *sensei* is being sheltered by her estranged husband. That might be too much to hope for, but he could have some idea of where she went, right? Even if he's not a 'child murderer', even if he's not a target, there's still meaning in looking for the husband."

"Right… I have no objections. But, what will we do specifically? If we ask someone at the university, do you think one of them might know where the husband is? Maybe someone in the office may have been invited to the wedding reception…"

I didn't know if they'd even had a reception, but I guess it was a starting point—and for that, I would first need to get the help of a student who, unlike me, had deep interactions with the teaching staff…

The help of my girlfriend, who, unlike me, was steadily expanding her social circles.

"There's a faster way, without having to make such a detour."

"? And by that, you mean?"

"The third door. There's still a door we haven't opened in *sensei*'s home, right? Didn't you assume that the room at the far end was probably a bedroom and study used by the husband?"

Ah—yeah. That was right.

It was just when I'd thought about checking it out that I'd been hit by the surprise attack from the blanket hiding in the crib.

When he left home, he had to have taken some of his belongings with him, but if he hadn't officially moved out, there should still be clues as to the husband's whereabouts—like the address to his parents' home or his workplace.

Even if we didn't find anything in that room, there was still a good chance that mail addressed to her husband was stored somewhere in her house, like in a cabinet.

However…

"Sorry for saying something like this, Ononoki-chan. But I'm not sure if I want to go back to that apartment… It's about time one of the residents noticed that all the cars in the parking lot had flat tires, so there might be a commotion…"

In the worst case, that large-scale "prank" may have been reported to the police, and the whole apartment building could be on lockdown. I probably wouldn't be on the wanted list, but since I'd left my New Beetle there with its license plate, it wouldn't be difficult to identify me, its owner.

"I think you're being too cautious, and I'll make sure to arrange things so that Gaen-san intervenes properly… But, *oni* onii-chan, did you forget? Besides destruction and investigation, I have one more tool-like function I can use."

"One more… Wh-what was it again?"

It was a sensitive part of her identity as a tool, so I didn't want to answer immediately in case I made a mistake… But when it came to Ononoki-chan's third function, it would be far and away the very best.

You could even call it her first function.

Ononoki-chan nodded.

"Movement. High-speed travel. So that no one sees us, we can jump directly from here using 'Unlimited Rulebook' and enter through the balcony."

"Ah—"

So there was a method like that—a short trip making use of Ononoki-chan's explosive power.

If the Iie-chan doll was a flying blanket, then Ononoki-chan was a flying corpse, so that resolved the problem.

We'd be able to slip past anyone on the lookout.

Incidentally, if you asked me why I wasn't able to come up with that idea on my own, then—though it could be fine if I were still a vampire—it surely wouldn't be safe for the current, nineteen-year-old, flesh-and-blood me to accompany Ononoki-chan in her high-speed travel.

At the very least, I'd become hypothermic or hypoxic.

Depending on the altitude, I could freeze and suffocate to death—the reason Ononoki-chan could use such a violent means of transportation with impunity was because she was a corpse and a doll.

However, it wasn't the time to be complaining—though it was the middle of summer, I pulled out the thickest clothes I could find,

even a ski cap I pulled out of the depths of my wardrobe, and clung to Ononoki-chan tightly.

A passionate hug.

After all, another likely cause of death would be death from slipping and falling… Which was even more likely since I was wearing gloves.

As a countermeasure to hypoxia, I would've liked to take an oxygen tank with me, but unlike Kanbaru, I wasn't an athlete… So I didn't have one in my room. I didn't have the time to go out and buy or borrow one, either, so I decided to make things simple and hold my breath for a minute.

"I won't mind if you want to become a vampire just a tiny bit, okay? I won't forgive you for deceiving Nade*kou*, but this much is all right."

Her standards were pretty hard to get, but Ononoki-chan's offer could be her setting a trap, so I respectfully declined… And so, after my rather unusual change of clothes…

"'Unlimited Rulebook'."

We set off.

So, do you think that I somehow managed to obtain the information of Associate Professor Iesumi's husband in the last of the three bedrooms, and, without even pausing for breath, I went with a hop-step-jump straight to where the husband was? Do you think I went to warn a complete stranger, saying, "Hey, you and your wife are being targeted by a flying blanket"?

On the contrary, it was not so.

The road movie of me was not written in the style of a Hollywood script—and let me just say now that I love Hollywood movies. Long live commercial movies! Contributing to the box office is what makes life worth living. At least, that's how I wanted to live, but it always ends up being, "How did things end up this way?"

As for what happened, allow me to tell you.

Things were going well until we arrived at the balcony of room 333… And technically, things were not going well even then.

Because, as expected, I was gasping for breath.

The measures I took for temperature and oxygen worked to a certain extent, but I was too defenseless against the air resistance that came with high-speed travel… I felt as if I'd been beaten up all over, and my physical strength was severely depleted.

And so, while I was trying to catch my breath, Ononoki-chan broke the window with a punch… It seemed her first function was not movement, but destruction after all.

After deciding to leave the clean-up to Gaen-san, it seemed like she'd lost all hesitation to destroy the house… No, she hadn't had the slightest hesitation from the moment she kicked down that second door.

However, since the window that broke led to the living room, it seemed she wasn't completely without thought… I wanted to examine Associate Professor Iesumi's bedroom, as well as the nursery (the root of the problem), as best as I could. Before scattering glass all around.

However, the highest investigation priority was the innermost room—this time, Ononoki-chan and I ended up actually trespassing into the apartment (still with our shoes on, so as not to get hurt by the glass), and headed for the room.

And then, we opened that third door.

Unlike the second door, it wasn't locked (or rather, the third door didn't even have a lock itself), so there was no need for the god of destruction to break down the door—and finally what we found in the room was… The husband's payslip? Residence card? New Year's

cards? A collection of commemorative stamps? A rare book on the bookshelf? A treasure map? A social network account?

Absolutely not.

What we witnessed was a stuffed doll overflowing with a handmade feeling—in a sense it was something we'd seen just the other day, so it wasn't particularly new, nor was it worth being surprised over.

However, it wasn't exactly the same, and I couldn't help but gasp—first of all, it was not in a cage, but lying on top of a bed.

And instead of a blanket, the top half was made with the quilt part of a futon, while the bottom half was made with the padded mattress part of a futon… It was kind of like balloon art made with two balloons.

In other words, it was huge.

It wasn't the size of a three-year-old.

What lay face-up on the bare mattress of the bed was a doll the size of an adult, the size of an average adult male.

The face was the same. "*Henohenomoheji*"—yes, resembling the Iie-chan doll from the other day… "Like parent and child".

It wasn't balloon art but futon art, but there were similarities between the two dolls even in the way they were made—like when you read both "*Kokoro*" and "*An'ya Kouro*" and feel that they were written by the same author.

"Are you really in college? '*Kokoro*' and '*An'ya Kouro*' have different authors, *oni* onii-chan."

Was that right.

I'd remembered them together, as *An'ya Kokoro*.

However, in that sense, there were differences, as well. Perhaps I should see it as both a difference and a similarity, but—the fruit knife.

At the time we discovered the Iie-chan doll, the fruit knife was stuck in her back, so it was not immediately visible. But this time—though it wasn't like making the knife obvious had been given priority—the knife was stuck in the middle of the doll's face.

It had been violently stabbed in.

You couldn't see the blade at all, and even the handle portion was stuck about 1 cm into the doll… In terms of the "*henohenomoheji*" face, it would be right between the "*heno*" and the "*heno*"—in other words, right between the eyes, deeply.

Even with the meager length of a fruit knife, it was so "deeply" that I wondered if the knife pierced through to the bed… If a blade were to be thrust into that part of the body at such an angle, even a vampire would die once.

But what about a doll?

A stabbed corpse on a bed. Lying spread-eagled, it didn't show any signs of movement… Well, that seemed obvious. Yeah, it was obvious, but…

"If we're to consider this an adult male—then, if there's the doll you named the Iie-chan doll, would this be the father doll?"

Ononoki-chan spoke decisively.

The father doll.

If it had been me, it would've taken at least three days to work up the courage to come to that conclusion, but I guess she was a professional who was used to this sort of situation.

"No, no, I gotta say I'm pretty spooked. To be honest, I don't feel so good. I may be expressionless, but I'm not heartless.[19] It was like this when we looked for the transistor-slender girl and investigated the Beniguchi family, but when I take on *oni*i-chan's requests, this is all there is, huh. As expected of a specialist of child abuse, there's never a dull moment."

"It's not like I was the one who made this doll."

"Then, who did?"

"……"

Who… If it was the same creator as the Iie-chan doll… The prime suspect would be Associate Professor Iesumi. But then, what about it?

What "bad feeling" would this be?

The Iie-chan doll in the cage in the nursery was also creepy, but I was still able to accept it as a stuffed doll… In other words, it was the right size.

But the father doll lying in this room was on a completely different level of creepiness… A large reason being that it was too huge to ignore.

A large size being that large reason.

I didn't really see life-sized dolls except at some kind of events, after all… Rather than a stuffed doll, it was more like a mannequin.

And not like the mannequins you see in boutiques, but those… Mannequins placed in the driver's seat of a car in videos meant to show the dangers of traffic accidents. As if this mannequin was going to drive into a wall without a seatbelt and fly face-first into the windshield—I could sense that sort of danger from it.

"Although I would say it's more like a murder investigation, *oni* onii-chan. You know, like a deduction scene where they use a mannequin in place of the victim to recreate the big trick."

Aha, that was a more appropriate example… After all, it wasn't like the father doll was going to be in a car accident, because it already had a fruit knife stuck in its face.

It was a past event.

A past that was irretrievable.

I looked again at the doll on the bed. To tell you the truth, I would have preferred to not look at it with wide-open eyes, but I mustered up the courage to look straight at it… The size of the doll had to be that of an adult male. In other words, it was hard to view this as a female doll. My bigger little sister might be around the same height, maybe even taller, but in terms of skeletal structure, it seemed to have been designed with a male in mind.

It was strange to discuss skeletal structure for a stuffed doll made of cloth, but… Well, maybe it was the aftereffects of high-speed flight, but I couldn't think clearly. I needed oxygen for my thoughts.

Plus, it was hot.

There was no point in continuing to wear these thick clothes anymore, so I might as well take off the jacket… I realized I was drenched in sweat. Half of it was probably a cold sweat, though… But I still couldn't wrap my head around it. Was it due to a lack of oxygen, after all?

"The fruit knife is the same one that was stuck in the abused doll. And I don't mean the same type of product. I mean it's exactly the same one."

She was being modest, but Ononoki-chan was analyzing the situation dispassionately, as if it were a crime scene investigation—well, Ononoki-chan didn't need oxygen, after all. It was doubtful if she was even breathing.

However, exactly the same? *Exactly?*

I'd assumed that the fruit knife that had been stuck in the Iie-chan doll had flown away with it, wrapped up in that flying blanket, but I hadn't been too concerned about it… But had it been in this next room all this time?

Stabbed into the father doll?

"…You're certain? From what I can tell, it could just have been mass-produced?"

"The fingerprints on the grip are the same as the ones on the fruit knife I saw the other day."

"O, Ononoki-chan, you can even analyze something like that!?"

Are your eyes a black light?

"That's a lie, pyon. There's a production number engraved on the edge of the handle. I'm saying that those numbers are the same."

Don't just say "that's a lie, pyon".

Don't try to get through it with cuteness.

It would've been amazing enough just remembering the production number, but the pretense of being able to analyze fingerprints with the naked eye was so big that I failed to be

impressed.

If you're going to call yourself a tool, don't do any false advertising.

But, the production number…?

"It's probably a pretty good knife. Made in Switzerland. Maybe a limited edition with a serial number produced by a master craftsman?"

Seriously? Even though I'd called it mass-produced?

I couldn't help that I couldn't see the fingerprints, considering I was no longer a vampire, but I was disappointed in my eye for appraisal.

But it seemed to fit better than thinking that a college professor living in such a nice apartment used such a cheap fruit knife… Swiss knives were a famous brand in their own right. However, even though it fit better, I wanted to express my disapproval.

"Isn't that a bit weird, Ononoki-chan? It would be impossible for the knife stuck in the back of the Iie-chan doll to simultaneously be stuck in the face of the father doll in the next room, right?"

"It's not impossible with micro-quantum theory."

"How pretentious."

"But it's not weird with some simple deduction. It's not like we saw the knife in the two dolls at the same time, right? All you have to do is take the knife out of the back of one and stick it in the face of the other."

The quantum theory had become a bizarre theory[20], but well, that made sense logically—however, the problem was, someone had to perform that act of taking out and putting in the knife.

The homeowner was missing, and the husband, who I'd suspected was the "murderer" of the Iie-chan doll at the instigation of Ougi-kun—

The husband… was the father doll?

No, no. Whoever did this.

Whether it was the wife or the husband, or someone else.

That "stabber" stabbed the Iie-chan doll in the cage, and then they left once. And after we witnessed the stabbed Iie-chan doll, they came back, pulled the knife from the back of the Iie-chan doll, stabbed the father doll in the next room in the face, and then left again—whoa, whoa.

Even if "the criminal will return to the crime scene", I don't think I've ever seen a criminal that goes back and forth like that—

"Ah! N-no, Ononoki-chan! It's true that I've been going back and forth to this apartment three times, but I'm not the criminal! Believe me!"

“I’m not doubting you. I can’t believe that you would joke around in this situation, *oni*i-chan, but I like you.”

I’d ended up getting her favor.

It wasn’t a joke, though… In this situation, it was true that the most suspicious one would be me… That is, the possibility that I was playing a prank on Ononoki-chan. It would certainly be like me to overlook something like the fruit knife’s production number.

“I know that I’m not the culprit, but that’s really the most suspect-like line I can think of.”

“If you put it that way, then it could also be a prank on my part. A prank to set you up.”

“Set me up…? Didn’t you like me?”

“There are a hundred times as many things I don’t like as there are things I do like about you. But that’s not important. The prime suspect isn’t me or you, *oni* onii-chan. Not even the homeowner *sensei* or her husband.”

“? Then who is it?”

“The abused doll. Since it can move around.”

…Ah.

I see. That could also be division of labor.

Just because the murder weapon was the fruit knife, it didn’t mean that the culprit that stabbed the Iie-chan doll in the back was the same as the culprit who stabbed the father doll in the face—and the “victim = culprit” structure was a standard technique in mysteries, even more so than threefold locked rooms.

Although, the victim was a doll, so it was rather novel that it didn’t even have to pretend to be dead… Sometime between that day and today, had the Iie-chan doll pulled the fruit knife from its back and “murdered” the father doll in the next room?

“…The Iie-chan doll and the father doll. Is it okay to assume that their creator was the same person?”

“It does seem that way.”

Ougi-kun had hypothesized that the balloon-art-like stuffed doll creator and the artist who drew the “*henohenomoheji*” face were two different people, but it didn’t matter if the creator was one or two or more people working together… But it did mean that the Iie-chan doll didn’t make the father doll.

The father doll was originally in this room.

It lay spread-eagled.

And then it was stabbed.

“Revenge…? Would that be it? Um…”

I’d almost forgotten due to the rush of developments, but the reason I’d come here was to look for clues to help me find the estranged husband—to protect him, even though he could be targeted

by the Iie-chan doll.

However, before even coming close to accomplishing that, are you saying that revenge had already been fulfilled? In the next room? Against a stuffed doll?

As payback for the despicable act of being stabbed in the back, it stabbed the doll in the face while looking into its eyes—although both the eyes doing the looking and the eyes being looked into were "*henoheno*".

"Ah—or perhaps, could this have been a rehearsal? For when it was actually going to enact revenge on its 'father'—"

"That way of thinking is very incompetent and cute, *oni* onii-chan."

Ononoki-chan, as expressionless as ever, crossed her arms—and posed a question to that incompetent and cute me.

"But does that father even exist anywhere in this world? Are you sure that the estranged husband exists? Is it true that that intellectual *sensei* is even married?"

Even though I should've been extremely (painfully?) used to being in an ambiguous environment where I didn't know what was real and what wasn't—when Ononoki-chan asked me those questions, I felt as if the ground was crumbling beneath my feet.

The ground beneath my feet, and the experience I'd built up so far.

I'd been to the mirror world. I'd been to a parallel world—I'd been to hell, and more recently, I'd even been to heaven.

But this feeling of being lost in someone else's delusion was a trip I'd never experienced before—it was a very different kind of fear than that of oddity phenomena.

It was a little late for it now, but I went to check out the interior of this third room of Room 333… I had only been focusing on the bed that was front and center, but I shouldn't forget that the reason I had flown here, to the point of becoming deprived of oxygen, was to look around the bedroom in the first place.

For the sake of searching for the husband's personal information.

The husband, the spouse, the partner, the father—for the sake of identifying this anonymous person, whom we didn't even know the name of yet.

But whether it was the magnificent writing desk, the small bookshelf next to it, the built-in closet, or the stereo set in the corner… Perhaps it was due to the way I was looking at it, but I couldn't sense any sort of individuality. It was like the concept of a "perfect workplace" taken too far.

Individuality. Or perhaps, humanity.

It was like I was looking at the set of a television drama… There were no hints of a life spent in this room. Although, since the couple was separated, the husband would no longer be spending his life in this room, so of course there wouldn't be anything like that…

Immediately after entering this room, I had gotten the impression that it was a simulation, like a car accident test or a crime scene investigation, but perhaps this was why? Not only due to the stabbed doll on the bed, but because the whole room formed such an image… In that sense, it differed from the nursery.

In the neighboring room, I felt the remnants of affection.

Though they were remnants, affection was still affection.

However, as a marked contrast, there was nothing like that in this room, not even a hint of time—yes.

It felt heartless.

Just like what Ononoki-chan had mentioned.

I wasn't sure how reliable my impressions were… But the second room had a lock while the third room did not. Even before opening the doors from the hallway, the difference was already apparent… And heartless.

"If we're talking about *Les Misérables*[21], I did see the musical in London,"

said Ononoki-chan.

This time, she was giving off a rather British impression, but had this girl actually taken part in the Battle of Waterloo?

That was much longer than a hundred years ago.

"I would add that the lack of the room giving off the sense of 'remnants' is probably due to the fact that every nook and cranny of this room has been thoroughly cleaned—while the nursery was also in order, it was dusty. I would say that the lack of clutter in the nursery was probably due to the fact that the room was normally left alone—meanwhile, in this room, I get the impression that it was cleaned on a regular basis."

I'd heard that homes quickly fall into disrepair when people don't live in them, but… A bedroom where care is regularly taken, and a nursery where it isn't?

Though there was no sense of life, there was a sense of cleanliness?

The first room—that is, Associate Professor Iesumi's room—gave me no impression of resembling either. It felt just like an extension of "someone else's house", just like the hallway and the living room.

"Could she be employing a housekeeper? Anyway, I don't think I'll be able to find any personal information. The books on the shelves just look like they were picked from a bookstore's ranking, and I can't tell what the owner of this room does for a living!"

What he does, and what he doesn't do.

If he even exists or not.

I'd said it was like a television drama set, but if that was the case, the setting wasn't as well done as it could be… It was finished superficially, but it seemed to be done arbitrarily and sloppily. I couldn't think they were trying to establish a character. Even though it felt like they spent a lot of money on the furniture, that oversight weighed on my mind.

Like a scratch mark.[22]

"If I had to describe it, I'd say it looks like a spy's hideout. I wonder if the father is, not a detective, but a spy. Like, this is where the confidence trick begins."[23]

"Ononoki-chan, are you being serious?"

“Not at all.”

The height of anonymity—it wasn’t about that at all.

However, what if Associate Professor Iesumi’s husband was not anonymous, but a completely fictitious character?

There were many differences between the second and third rooms, but since the daughter was fictitious, it wouldn’t be strange if the father was fictitious as well.

No, it was still strange, but for the sake of taking a mathematical approach and using a proof by contradiction to prove that strangeness, let’s first assume that it wasn’t strange… In her personal history that Associate Professor Iesumi told me about, where did the lies begin?

This late in the game, I didn’t feel comfortable throwing everything out as a lie… But it was probably a lie that she was separated.

After all, her husband was sleeping right here. Even if he was a doll. Even if he was stabbed to death. Even if he was stabbed to death by his three-year-old daughter… Even if that three-year-old daughter was a doll… Was it myself that had made that picky observation that “living separate lives under the same roof” was also a form of separation?

But would saying “I didn’t lie” like some sort of narrative trick be accepted with open arms in the real world…? No.

The remnants of affection that was the nursery.

At the very least, there were traces that her daughter, up until a year old, or maybe two, was “living” in that room… As Ononoki-chan said, we didn’t know for sure what happened to her after that, though there was some validity to the idea that the Iie-chan doll was made because she died in some way.

“…But, no matter how old she was, living or dead, if there was a daughter, there had to be a father, right? Biologically speaking.”

“There had to be a father, but he won’t necessarily be a husband.”

What a realistic tween girl—but of course. Biologically speaking.

It was more likely than cloning.

But in the case of Associate Professor Iesumi, who was a Swiss citizen, she got her residency status by marrying her Japanese husband when she moved to Japan… Ah, but, I guess that wasn’t necessarily true.

If the truth of the university professor’s disappearance was actually that she was deported after it was exposed that she was an illegal immigrant, it would be a tragic truth that I would be deeply disappointed in… But, if that was the case, I didn’t think the university that hired her would have bothered to publicize it…

As a large organization, it seemed more likely they would handle things privately.

"If this were a situation for the immigration authorities to step in, this Room 333 would've been broken into long ago. The fact that this stabbed doll is still lying around here means they haven't."

However, even so, the possibility remained that Associate Professor Iesumi was not married, and thus didn't have residency status and was in Japan illegally—and perhaps the possibility that she escaped before her illegal residence was discovered.

I wasn't a law student, so I didn't exactly know the laws in that respect—ah, if only I were back in high school. Then I could ask that bundle of intelligence, Hanekawa, to perform a legal interpretation for me.

I could tell you for a fact that, as far as I could tell from my nervous looking around when I broke in from the balcony, the investigative authorities had yet to act, even in the case of the mass flat tire incident in the parking lot.

"Even though I'd said that making a stuffed doll out of your dead child and carrying it around was a cliché sob story…"

"Did you go that far? Aren't you pretending too hard to sound evil, Ononoki-chan?"

"Making a stuffed doll out of your absent husband and living together with it is not something you can keep doing. Suggesting therapy might already be a weak step to take."

"That's true… There was a time when I was so lonely after that bundle of intelligence, Hanekawa, left for her overseas travels, that I used to use her braids, which I'd cut off myself a while back, as a stand-in to consult about my problems… But I think there was something wrong with me back then."

"Don't ever talk to me again. That wasn't that long ago, right? That wasn't 'back then' but right now."

I'm more afraid of you having those braids than I am of you using them as a stand-in, said Ononoki-chan—but wait, what about that?There was something I'd overlooked.

Or rather, there was something I hadn't thought about until now… Whether it was the Iie-chan doll or the father doll, *why* were they made out of bedding?

A blanket. A quilt and a padded mattress.

There were too many other questions, and I was vaguely persuaded by the balloon-art-like effect, but normally, you wouldn't make a stuffed doll out of a futon, right?

Unlike Teori Tadatsuru, I wasn't a puppeteer, so I couldn't say for sure—but at the very least, it surely wasn't a common style…

Just as the braids that I held a strong attachment to were a

stand-in for Hanekawa, was the bedding a key item for Associate Professor Iesumi to connect with her family?

"Can you not go from an uncomfortable confession to an important realization? Is it really true that you're old enough to vote, *oni* onii-chan? …Considering that the blanket was lurking in the crib, I don't think the realization itself is too off the mark."

Strong attachment… Feelings.

I'd assumed that the Iie-chan doll started to move because it had been abused and then killed, but—what if the blanket itself was the reason that oddity was born…? In that case, what about the father doll?

What about the quilt and the padded mattress?

"For now, I may as well kill."

Ononoki-chan said so in her monotone, so I braced myself—I thought that my execution, which was supposed to be postponed, would suddenly be carried out due to the confession of a new (disgusting) crime, but the one who was to be executed was not me.

"For now, it's just a stuffed doll… But if this stabbed doll starts to move too, it'll be chaos. Just in case, I'll smash it to bits, fruit knife and all, using 'Unlimited Rulebook'. Any objections?"

"No…"

To be honest, I had a visceral reaction to the decision to destroy something that took on a human form… But when I thought of the Iie-chan doll that attacked me as a fluttering blanket, it didn't seem like we could settle things simply by unraveling the quilt and the padded mattress.

The situation of the Iesumi residence remained a mystery, but as long as the reason for the stuffed dolls turning into oddities was unknown, it was definitely better to make the first move with regards to the father doll.

I did feel that using Ononoki-chan's super-special move, the "Unlimited Rulebook" that led me to my oxygen deficiency, was a bit much (was it even a skill that was okay to use indoors?), but it seemed the stance of my nice *badi* was to do things thoroughly.

Although I expected she would destroy the whole bed… From breaking windows to kicking down doors, Ononoki-chan's god of destruction act knew no bounds.

"But is it really okay? It's still fine if it breaks the bed, but if you penetrate through the floor, that would definitely be bad. There's probably someone living downstairs… Someone who isn't a stuffed doll."

"It's fine. I figured I'd try out the new move that I thought of recently."

"New move?"

“It’s a variation. To minimize the range of destruction… This was originally supposed to be used on Araragi Tsukihi, but, well, that’s just the way things go.”

“Is that so… If you have a move like that, then… Hold on a second, Ononoki-chan. Are you telling me you still plan on killing my sister?”

Instead of answering my question, Ononoki-chan pointed her fist at the father doll with the fruit knife.

In the past, she would raise her index finger as if she were pointing at something, but this time, she raised her pinky finger, which was shorter than her index finger.

“‘Unlimited Rulebook’—Pinky Edition.”

If the level of destruction could be controlled by such a simple change approach (not so much “new technology”), then I wished she had used the pinky edition when destroying the front door of my house—that was what I wanted to say, but the range hadn’t really been confined to a minimum, and the power wasn’t that suppressed… The bed had been destroyed, down to the floor. It was a relief that she didn’t penetrate through to the room underneath us.

“I’m not really a dab hand at holding back. Or should I say, I’m not really a dab finger.[24] Whether it’s my index finger or my pinky finger.”

The god of destruction knew no guilt… Well, the result was that the father doll was now in pieces, so at least we achieved our goal.

However, there had been quite a lot of noise during the destruction, so it was probably better if we got the hell out of this apartment, but…

“*Oni* onii-chan, keep an eye on this room for a bit. I’m going to go check out the other areas,”

said Ononoki-chan.

“The other areas?”

“The fridge, the trash cans, the toilet, the bath, that intellectual *sensei*‘s bedroom.”

Unlike before, it was now a full-fledged investigation… Since the third bedroom, which had no clues, was now destroyed, it seemed she was going to investigate all the places we hadn’t laid a hand (finger?) on yet.

I felt like I should help somehow, but since this was a job for the pros, I would probably just get in the way.

But was there any meaning in keeping an eye on this room, which had literally become remnants…?

“There is. The futon that’s been torn to shreds might still start to move.”

“I see… When you’re a professional, you have to be that cautious.”

That made it sound like a really immortal oddity, though… I’ve heard that it’s not easy for even vampires to regenerate after being torn to pieces.

“If the scraps start moving, then I should just call you over, Ononoki-chan?”

“Yeah. If I feel like it, I’ll suspend the investigation and come help you.”

“Maybe you can come to help with more motivation?”

“By the way, isn’t it hard?”

“? Isn’t what hard?”

“Helping an older woman. It’s not like helping a little girl, is it.”

Saying so rather bluntly, Ononoki-chan briskly left to analyze the other rooms—damn, she sure kept telling me off.

Helping little girls was pretty difficult, too… I made nothing but mistakes… But, when dealing with an adult, the kind of difficulty was different.

In the end, perhaps this was just a cautionary tale about not doing favors for people you didn’t know well… I never thought that the lesson my parents taught me about not talking to strange adults would come into play here.

It wasn’t really coming into play, though.

I’d basically ignored it, though.

A lesson from my parents, huh… When Ononoki-chan was around, I could play the tough guy who could chat about things casually even in a crisis, but now that I was alone, I started to think about unnecessary things.

When not only the “beloved three-year-old daughter” but also the “estranged husband” might not actually exist, it really started to bum me out… Even my illegal acts, having long since deviated from what I’d been requested to do, seemed like irreplaceable components of such delusions.

The fact that I, of all people, had turned into such a component gave me more chills than seeing the father doll that had been stabbed in the face… Even after the father doll was torn to shreds, it didn’t relieve me at all.

A haze still hung over my mood—just by coming to investigate, it was as if I wandered into a more abyssal and more circuitous labyrinth.

Well, if it turned out that the estranged husband was not real to begin with, then the urgency of warning him that his life was in danger disappeared, too, so that confirmation alone meant that this investigation wasn’t useless—even more so if the stabbing of the father doll had already fulfilled the revenge of the Iie-chan doll.

But, now that I’d thought of that, the existence of Associate Professor Iesumi herself was never in doubt, right? We’d met in person at the lab, and before that, I had been taking Swiss German from her for the entire first term.

Just as Switzerland was a real country that existed, Associate Professor Iesumi was a real person that existed.

The hope of locating the associate professor based on the

whereabouts of her estranged husband had already been cut off. In that case, whether or not we'd be able to locate her would depend on the forensic work Ononoki-chan was currently performing in the first room, as well as the living and dining rooms and so forth… But tracking down the location of someone who may have even forged her residency status was completely beyond the job of a specialist of immortal oddities, no matter how you looked at it, right?

That was, normally, a job for the police.

As an authority on evil spirits, she'd already fulfilled her role when she destroyed that father doll into pieces before it turned into an oddity… Of course, dealing with the "flying blanket" that I'd let escape was my responsibility, but in practical terms, I couldn't come up with a route to achieve that goal… No, no, don't get all negative just from being alone.

I should be thinking not about what I couldn't do, but what I could do.

What could I do right now? As ordered by the tween girl, I was to keep an eye on the torn futon to make sure it didn't move among the fragments of the bed—it wasn't an extremely specialized job that only I could do, but it was better than overthinking and losing motivation.

I was the one who should be more motivated.

I didn't know how long Ononoki-chan would take to investigate all the rooms, so I might as well sit down in the chair to keep watch… Or should I remain standing in order to respond immediately if something happened?

While I distracted myself with such a decision that didn't really matter…

"____!"

I was startled.

It seemed like one of the scraps actually did move slightly—oh my, perhaps remaining standing was the right move after all, I thought while seated.

However, that tiny scrap didn't do anything like fly in my direction… On the other hand, it wasn't the misjudgment of a coward, either, as the scrap continued to flutter slightly.

Watching carefully, even the scraps around it, the feathers that were inside, the cotton of the mattress, and the closed blackout curtains—all of them were fluttering and swaying, very faintly.

Huh… What was this?

Since the weight of each part had become lighter after being torn to shreds, was it just wavering at the slightest breeze—*the slightest breeze?*

Breeze?

Even though we were indoors?

Maybe if it was as a result of the window to the living room that Ononoki-chan broke—but in this room with the curtains and windows closed, just like the nursery?

Although the floor had not been penetrated, was there air being blown up from the floor through some invisible hole due to air pressure or something? If not… Then maybe it was reacting to the air movement caused by rats or something running around under the floor… But, the idea of rats being in an apartment like this… … … Although, it didn't have to be a rat to move air… I moved the air just by moving to sit down on the chair… In other words… In other words, it didn't have to be under the floor, but *within this room*, right?

By the time I had that epiphany, it was too late.

While I'd readied myself to keep an eye on the shreds of the father doll, I was attacked from behind—by my own thick jacket, which I had just taken off because of the heat.

It was rather rare for someone to be attacked by a jacket on the same day he was attacked by a blanket, but this wasn't the time to be proud of it—I'd said it was "too late", but it wasn't in vain that I had just barely noticed. And it wasn't in vain that I'd been attacked by a blanket a few hours earlier on the same day.

Just before the sleeves of the jacket wrapped around my neck, I managed to insert one arm into the gap… The trauma of not wanting to be strangled by cloth again moved my body by reflex.

However, its power was so strong that I was easily knocked backwards into a suplex. To be more precise, as soon as I felt the force of the pull, I thought, "Oh, this is impossible," so instead of bracing my legs, I deliberately let myself fall down—it was probably contrary to the idea of taking *ukemi* in judo or something, but I was hoping that, by falling on my entire back, the damage would be distributed and dispersed, and I would also be able to make a loud noise.

I was hoping that the reliable Ononoki-chan would hear the sound and come to my rescue (if she felt like it), but unfortunately, the sound didn't come out as I had hoped.

The jacket that pulled me down was underneath me, so as a result, the sound came out muffled—the damage had also been mitigated by that much, but even so, it was pretty bad to get knocked down like this.

You could say I'd deftly managed to avoid being strangled, but you could also say this position meant one of my arms was sealed… If the jacket kept squeezing me with this power, it would break my arm and my neck together.

The power to bend iron—but no, wasn't that supposed to belong to the Iie-chan doll? It wasn't even the father doll. Why was my own jacket attacking me—it wasn't like I'd abused my own jacket before!?

Or had that guess been completely wrong?

It wasn't that the blanket of the Iie-chan doll was special, but that Room 333 of this apartment building was a place where all types of cloth attacked people—but let's think about that later, right now I needed to call for help!

If not, I was going to be constricted to death, quietly, without a sound… Even though the only thing that needed to be constricted was Hanekawa's narrow waist. I opened my mouth to scream for help, not just to reach the living room, but throughout the apartment. The thick sleeves of my jacket were still trying to choke me, but luckily, I was still able to open my throat—and into that open throat.

My cap jumped in.

It was my ski cap.

The same one I'd taken off a while ago because it was too hot —even my cap!?

"Mmf… Mmgh…"

You've got to be kidding me.

Was I going to die from eating a hat?

No, but, at this rate, it was going to stuff my windpipe and suffocate me—to think my jacket and cap would attack my neck from both inside and out.

My clothes were rebelling.

I had no idea that the heavy clothing I wore to endure a high-speed high-altitude flight would backfire in such a way… This wasn't just hypoxia, it was anoxia.

It wasn't about saving myself on my own, it was about dying on my own.

At this point, it was no longer about thinking about myself as uncool or shameful. I could at least use my free arm and legs to slam against the floor and send a message to Ononoki-chan via Morse code —no, just slamming against the floor was fine.

But no matter how long I waited, no help came.

What happened, Ononoki-chan?

Was she really that uncomfortable with coming to the rescue of a man who asks braids for advice?—or was there just no sound being made at all? I was wearing out a lot faster than I expected… I thought I was kicking the floor as hard as I could, as if beating a big drum, but in reality, I was probably only making a noise akin to shuffling on the floor.

And, regardless of Ononoki-chan, not even Shinobu was helping me at all. It was true that I may have missed the opportunity to turn on the Bat-Signal, but Shinobu-chan, you're free to come save me whenever you want, you know?

Was I supposed to get over a crisis of this level on my own?

Just like when I'd been locked in that cage?

No, she was probably just sleeping peacefully… Although I think that young girl would be shocked to discover that her partner died because of a reason as simple as "oversleeping"…

But was it really like this when you died?

Even Hachikuji Mayoi, who was killed in a car accident (and later became a god)—her accident only appeared to be dramatic, but fundamentally, it would have been an abrupt and sudden death.

Accidents, incidents, illnesses, and lifespans. Human deaths were always abrupt and a bit of a letdown—that was probably the case, but that "abruptness" was not something I was going to let

happen this very instant.

So that Shinobu won't have to regret oversleeping.

I'd thought that I was going to die because I ate my cap, but it was just the opposite—I was saved because I ate my cap.

As I continued to squirm, I felt the ski cap in my mouth slowing down—the ski cap was moving like a drill trying to get down my throat, and it almost made me think it would be better to just swallow it altogether, but that twisting screw was weakening, weakening, weakening… And it stopped.

"!? Guh, ptoo—hah!"

Without even knowing why—well, in terms of not knowing why, I didn't even know why the cap jumped into my mouth in the first place—I was able to spit out the ski cap from my mouth.

The jacket was still strangling me, so I couldn't expect to fully recover my breathing, but this was a huge relief.

Of course, I couldn't help but fear that the vomited hat would try to deep kiss me again, but the saliva-covered hat remained limp and motionless on the floor—it looked like it was just a ski cap again.

Did, did I finish it off…?

Even though I didn't do anything? Just by struggling on my back? Was it because I was a former vampire, so my bite was pretty strong…? Or maybe… My saliva? I hadn't used it lately, so I wasn't sure if the aftereffects still held, but the bodily fluids of vampires held healing abilities… No, no, what would the point of healing be?

Then, if it wasn't that.

"Water… Is it water?"

Were these weak to water?

It was just a wild guess, but the characteristics of cloth and fabric seemed to coincide with that weakness… It dove into my mouth to suffocate me, but, because it got covered in my saliva, the oddity-turned ski cap was tranquilized.

No one wants to wear a wet hat, right?

Then, the same could be said for the jacket, so maybe it was worth a try—it was hard to gauge that because of my oxygen-deprived brain, but it was the only plan I had.

Well, when I became a vampire, I wasn't able to swim, either—perhaps water was a common weak point for oddities. Although, it would be a different story for crabs…

So, I poured as much saliva as I could onto the jacket—or so I'd like to say, but I unfortunately couldn't spit out two liters of saliva. If I was still taking advantage of my immortality, I would have pulled out my tongue with my fingers and stained the whole room with my blood, but right now, doing so would be nothing more than a cruel suicide.

Also, that was one of Risuka-chan's tactics.

Araragi Koyomi was a bit less cool—resisting the tightening of the jacket as much as I could, I used my free arm and legs to crawl across the apartment floor on my back to the bathroom.

Fortunately, I'd gotten a grasp of the floor plan when I'd first visited… If anywhere with water was fine, I nearly resigned myself to heading for the toilet, but my sense of hygiene prevailed.

I was surprisingly fastidious.

I was the kind of person who died in a survival situation.

And I was moving like I was cleaning the floor with my entire body… Was this some sort of snake curse?

So, after erratically driving myself across the floor, I tumbled into the bathroom and took a full-body shower with my clothes on, as if I'd mistakenly turned on the faucet while preparing to bathe—with the audacious fashion choice of wearing outerwear as a scarf.

Basically, if I'd made the wrong assumption, I would've suffocated to death while soaked to the skin, just like the ski cap earlier. A college student passed away in the bathroom after trespassing in the apartment of a missing associate professor during his summer vacation… I'd asked something like, "was it really like this when you died?" But I would like to make a correction. I really didn't want to die in such a strange way.

And as you can tell from the fact that I was able to retract my previous statement, it seemed that the idea that water was a weakness, my own little unprovable Riemann hypothesis, was correct—and the only thing that went limp was my jacket.

My breathing was pretty ragged… And if the shower had been a mist shower, I might not have made it. Even though I'd been released, I didn't feel like standing up at all… It was a hassle to even turn off the faucet, so I simply basked in the stream of water. Like meditating under a waterfall.

How refreshing.

No, not in the least.[25]

"Ah… Umm…"

Umm.

What had I been doing just now? Oh yeah, keeping watch… Making sure the scraps of the father doll didn't start moving individually or trying to reform… I had to keep watch…

"Oh, so this is where you were, *oni* onii-chan, or for short, *oni*i-chan. Sorry for disturbing you in the middle of your shower. I came to warn you—that clothes will start to attack you, so don't ever open the wardrobe."

When I realized, Ononoki-chan was standing outside the bathroom, looking down at me thoroughly soaked—even though her

expressionless face hadn't changed, the hem of her maxi dress and shoulder straps were in disarray, and her neck and arms were clearly bruised, so it was easy to perceive that she had been through a fierce battle.

I'd perceived it, but what the hell happened?

If I had to guess, it would be that during her investigation of the other rooms, she naturally opened the wardrobe to look for something and was ganged up on… Unlike me, the god of destruction would have been able to use brute force to escape… Which explained why she couldn't come to my rescue despite me making so much noise.

To think that our battle sounds were canceling each other out.

"Got it. I'll be careful."

I stood up.

Break time was over.

Now that I've showered and refreshed myself, let's continue.

When I asked for details, it turned out that Ononoki-chan wasn't just attacked by clothing, but by the carpet, as well—if it had been me, I would have surely been trounced by that combination, but that was the god of destruction for you. Apparently she'd torn apart even that by sheer power. If only I had even a tenth of that power, I wouldn't have had to struggle so much, but I suppose I was asking for too much.

It was presumptuous to even ask for a hundredth of that power.

I was lucky that my ski cap aimed for the inside of my mouth when I tried to call for help… No, it wasn't just luck. It was that same high learning ability from before—or in this case, I suppose, *for that point in time*, a low learning ability. It was an oddity that had just been born, so it was as if it had destroyed itself on its own.

"No, no, it's a pretty big deal. Even if the ski cap destroyed itself, the fact that you used that as a stepping stone to defeat the jacket instead of relying on vampire power shows how much you've grown, *oni* onii-chan. My evaluation of you has definitely gone up. I'll be sure to report this to Gaen-san properly."

"I'd prefer if you didn't report me. That's no longer reporting, you're just snitching on me. …Ononoki-chan, are you okay with all those bruises?"

"They aren't bruises, it's livor mortis. In my case. Since I'm a corpse. But I'm fine—something like this is nothing but a scratch."

Being told it was a scratch after being told it was livor mortis didn't make me think she was any more okay.

"However, it's one thing for me to have been attacked by *sensei*'s clothes, but you ended up being attacked by your own clothes, didn't you, *oni*i-chan. The rules seem to be kind of hard to understand…"

"Even the clothes we're wearing now could be big trouble. Okay, Ononoki-chan, let's strip."

"Do you want me to reevaluate my evaluation of you?"

"Just in case, wouldn't it be better to dampen that dress and make it see-through?"

"Your ulterior motive is to make it see-through, isn't it. Mm… I think it's the other way around, *oni* onii-chan. Your ski cap and jacket triggered the conditions because you lost to the heat and took them off. So, we're better off not stripping."

"Don't say it like I took them off because I was lacking in willpower. It's the middle of summer! I didn't lose to the heat, I

simply dealt with it."

"Shall I make it so that you can't feel temperature at all?"

"Scary scary scary scary! I'm getting the chills!"'

But, now that she'd said so, it sounded right.

If even my jeans, shirt, and even my underwear and socks attacked me unconditionally, they would have wrung out my entire body in no time, before I had the chance to even take them off… They wouldn't have even allowed me to move in that wiggly, snakelike way.

The point in common between the jacket and the ski cap would be that I'd taken it off and tossed them—I'd taken them off and "thrown them away".

…Was that the key word?

The fact that I'd *thrown them away*?

Er, it would be a problem to conflate that with the idea of "throwing away one's own child"… But come to think of it, when I was locked in the cage on my second visit and I used my jeans to fetch the carpenter's tools, while I did take them off, I hadn't let them go. I had to hold the cuffs tight to use it like a rope…

If I wanted to force a commonality with Associate Professor Iesumi's clothes and carpet that attacked Ononoki-chan…

"Well, I dunno. This is totally out of my area of expertise… It's one thing to be attacked by a suit or shirt or parka, but being attacked by panties and pantyhose was pretty fresh. I fought that fierce battle while thinking that those things were your specialty, *oni* onii-chan."

"It sounds like the both of us were enjoying some not-so-picture-perfect battles."

"A question for you, *oni*i-chan. Are you sure that the blanket that locked you in the animal cage during the day was actually that abused doll? Not just a generic blanket that was in the crib?"

"Well… I think so."

"Could it be that they just have the same color? You know, when it comes to the human eye, it can easily confuse the kanji for *shakoku* [社告] and *kakitsubata* [杜若]."

"Hey, hey, there's no way I'd confuse *shakoku* and *kakitsubata*… Wait, they're exactly the same!"

No, that wasn't it.

"The '*henohenomoheji*' design was there, and there was a hole from when it was stabbed in the back."

Of course, that had been another assault, and like this one, I didn't really understand the whole story. But if it was just a matter of whether or not the magical flying blanket that I let escape was a component of the Iie-chan doll, then I could say so definitively.

Please let me do at least that much.

Ononoki-chan was probably thinking that if other garments, cloth, and fabric could start to move, then even a normal blanket that hadn't been abused could start to move… And there was probably something to that assumption… But that might be a point that should be considered separately.

"If so, maybe the clothes that attacked us didn't so much turn into oddities as turn into thralls."

"Turn into thralls…? What do you mean by that?"

"The same as what happened to you in the past, you bastard."

Don't be so coarse with your language at every turn.

Although, this case was something I'd completely gotten Ononoki-chan wrapped up in, so I guess I couldn't complain no matter how she treated me… It's miserable to get wrapped up in trouble! That was something I'd said a lot last year, but I suppose this was what it was like to be the one to get someone involved.

"Are you saying that the Iie-chan doll was growing its 'companions'…? Like, after escaping from this room, it ordered its minions to take care of its pursuers…?"

"Or perhaps, it's an oddity that possesses that sort of ability. In other words, *the ability to control cloth*… In that case, rather than turning into oddities, it would be closer to describe it as an automatic trap. Like landmines planted all over the house."

Putting their clothes on the floor, opening the wardrobe, or even breaking the glass or destroying the bed… Each and every action made by the trespasser could have been a trigger that set off the trap?

Hmm.

The simple attack by the ski cap and jacket certainly did feel like an "automatic trap"… As if they were following orders as straightforwardly as possible… They didn't react to any other actions I made.

It was a bit strange to be giving advice to my enemies, but for example, if it saw me heading for the bathroom, it could have unwrapped one sleeve of the jacket strangling me and moored it to the doorstop in the hallway, and that alone would have dashed my hopes.

But… Even so, I felt a simple validity to the idea that they had become thralls—though it was a "mistaken" sense of validity… As someone who had once been turned into a thrall himself.

"That's the first time you and I have agreed on something. Yeah, I think so, too."

"That's pretty shameless of you."

"I may not be a thrall of some oddity, but I have been revived as a tool for the specialists. Well, it's true that this creepy house itself has become a breeding ground for oddities. It's a good thing we came in with our shoes on."

If we had taken off our shoes, would they have attacked us as well? I didn't know if the balcony counted as part of the "house", or if the "shoes" counted as cloth, and that might be another thing to verify… But honestly, I didn't really want to actively verify it.

At this point, Ononoki-chan's decision to destroy the father doll was most likely absolutely correct… If I had been attacked by that giant doll, I didn't think I would have made it through.

"Now that there are more oddities, we have even more reasons to look for the 'flying blanket'. If it's possible that that abused doll is making more companions somewhere and multiplying endlessly, we can't leave it alone. Does that discourage you, *oni* onii-chan?"

"Not in the least. I'm raring to go. Araragi Koyomi's ready to take anything on."

"Well, I don't hate that bold front of yours. It's almost something I'd like to tell children."

"Helping an older woman is certainly pretty difficult, but I've never been one to back down from a challenge."

"Really…?"

"No, I was wrong."

"Well, maybe you've got enough guts for the saying, 'if you clear your mind, even a fire will feel cool'."

"Whether it's an automatic trap or thralls… Does the fact that they're placed here and there mean that there's something in this Room 333 worth protecting? Like the husband's personal information, or where Associate Professor Iesumi disappeared to… Something that the Iie-chan doll wants to cover up."

It may have been a simple self-defense system against trespassers, but after nearly dying and becoming soaking wet, I couldn't leave empty-handed. Araragi Koyomi's reputation was at stake.

"In that case, I think I can come up with some good news for you, *oni* onii-chan."

"? What do you mean?"

"Well, let's think about that after we get out of here… Anyway, it means we don't have to take any more risks to keep searching Room 333."

"…Did you already find important information? Before opening Associate Professor Iesumi's wardrobe, you already found something in the living room…"

Wait, then she wouldn't have bothered with the wardrobe…

But she shouldn't be the kind of corpse doll to turn tail and run away without having obtained anything. Absolutely not. It couldn't be.

At first glance, she looked like an emotionless doll, but on the

inside, she was more competitive than me, and more likely to hold a grudge than I did. I'm sure she felt even more strongly than I did that we couldn't leave empty-handed.

"Well, if I say this, you'll probably insinuate that I'm a 'god of destruction' again, but you see, when I was fighting the intellectual *sensei*'s pantyhose, there was a bit of collateral damage."

It seemed her biggest grudge was being called a god of destruction, but apparently, her most difficult opponent had been the pantyhose… Because I was unlearned, I'd never worn them before, but I heard that they're surprisingly strong.

It's nice that she was able to win in the end… But collateral damage?

Really?

"As a result, the ceiling of *sensei*'s room was broken."

"If that's the result, then you were the cause. Don't tell me you pierced through it?"

"It's fine. This is the top floor, so even if I pierce through it, it's just the roof. And the roof is off-limits, so no one will be there."

So she did pierce through it. That's not fine at all.

It was like this place had become the rooftop.

This case was getting bigger and bigger… This wasn't good news at all. Give me a break.

"As a result."

Ononoki-chan, who'd dispassionately repeated her acts of violence, repeated.

"Now that a new area, the rooftop, has opened up, I was able to find something like this. It was a clever hiding place, but I got a lucky break—there's a ray of light for us."[26]

"No matter how cleverly you try to word things, all you did was break the ceiling, okay? That punch line isn't going to work. …So what is that?"

With the ceiling having been renovated to include a skylight, I could more or less guess at the state of Associate Professor Iesumi's private quarters, but I still hoped that the battle damage was confined to that room—if so, then the living room and the nursery on either side would still be undamaged by the god of destruction, and despite our predicament, we might still be able to continue our investigation.

But I was too naive.

From the first room, Ononoki-chan had pierced through the walls on both sides—was she a user of the Special Beam Cannon, this girl?

It wasn't just the ceiling but also the walls that were demolished, remodeling the 3LDK into a 1LDK. To make matters worse, the distinction between the living room, dining room, and kitchen was a bit of a mess.

As though a typhoon had passed.

The pieces of the father doll must have been moving slightly, not because of the oddity-turned jacket behind me, but perhaps because of Ononoki-chan's surging attacks… The scope of our illegal actions had become drastically more illegal.

Even a burglar wouldn't make the place look this miserable… The once neat and tidy Room 333 had become so desolate that even if a burglar were to break in, they would leave without stealing anything.

It was like I'd consulted my dependable homeroom teacher in an attempt to privately settle a dispute with a classmate, only for that teacher to hold a large-scale class meeting.

Well, there were some matters that couldn't be resolved without making a big deal out of them… But I'd been made an accomplice to an awful crime.

No. Shockingly enough, I was the main offender.

Was I really going to be a police officer in the future?

Regardless, at this point there was no right or wrong. The investigation had to be suspended—partly out of fear of being reported by the neighbors, but even if there were any traces of Associate Professor Iesumi or her husband, or any clues that would help in the search for the Iie-chan doll, we had scrambled them all up. Instead of searching through the trash cans—the whole room became a trash can.

And if we weren't careful, we could be attacked by more cloth, and I was afraid we might fall into a completely different trap… Taking various factors into consideration, the conclusion was obvious.

Let's get out of here.

"'Unlimited Rulebook'—Disengagement Edition."

Strangely enough, since there was a hole in the ceiling, our escape could be completed without having to go out to the balcony—I wore my wet jacket and wet hat, thinking that it was still better than not wearing them in the extremely cold air, but I'd forgotten that moisture froze in the air.

Even though I'd worried so much about hypothermia and hypoxia, and even though I'd even experienced anoxia in Room 333—to think that my own efforts would make me get hypothermia on the way back home… What the hell was I doing?

Was I suicidal?

Erm, was this a babysitting job to get some credits for my language course?

Nevertheless, this adventure did produce some results.

#1. No sign of the husband in the third room.

#2. Aside from the Iie-chan doll, there was also the father doll.

#3. In Room 333, other things made of cloth start to move.

#4. Cloth was weak to water.

And—the new hint that Ononoki-chan managed to find on the rooftop, just as planned.

Yes, the long-awaited new hint.

"So, Ononoki-chan. What is that?"

After we landed and I was able to catch my breath (I said this rather lightly, but it took me over five minutes to recover), I asked the same question again, exactly the same as when I'd been shown "that" in Room 333.

"A doll. A stuffed doll."

"……"

Incidentally, our landing zone was the all-too-familiar Shirohebi Park—it didn't matter where we went as long as we could get away from Room 333, but I wanted to avoid landing at my house. I had a strong feeling that there was a possibility my house would not be safe.

In that respect, this park was a place where we used to have meetings in the past… Another candidate for our heliport was the grounds of Kitashirahebi Shrine, but on the off chance that we accidentally destroyed the shrine, Hachikuji would probably get pretty angry.

It had been a while since I was last here, but this park was as empty as ever… Had declining birth rates gotten this bad in my town?

"You wanna see it again?"

Saying that, Ononoki-chan tossed "that" at me—though it was an important piece of evidence that we'd managed to obtain, she

wasn't treating it carefully at all. I wasn't saying she should go as far as putting it in an evidence bag, but…

A doll. A stuffed doll.

One that fit in the palm of my hand… It was much smaller than the Iie-chan doll, and naturally couldn't even begin to compare to the father doll. It was the perfect size for a key chain.

"…Hm."

Strictly speaking, the word "doll" wasn't accurate when it came to this piece of evidence—because it didn't take on a "human form".[27]

It was a bear.

I'd already displayed my terrible eye for appraisal when it came to that fruit knife, but I could say this with confidence—it was a mass-produced product, like those sold in gift shops.

Of course, that didn't mean mass production was inferior to handmade. And after having seen those two handmade dolls earlier, I especially thought as such.

Was it what they called a teddy bear?

In that case, was it more apt to call it a stuffed doll? After all, it wasn't like a corpse doll born from sorcery or a balloon-art-like futon doll could be considered "stuffed"…

In any case, it was a small stuffed bear.

In terms of design, it looked quite old… Not that it was old-fashioned or dated—it just simply looked old. As if it had deteriorated over time. Plus, it was dirty… It must have been exposed to the elements for quite a while… Ononoki-chan had said she'd gotten it from the rooftop, but without being picky with my words, it almost made me wonder if Ononoki-chan just pulled it out of a trash can.

"…So, is there a USB flash drive containing important international secrets concealed within this teeny bear?"

"Of course there isn't. I just thought that this could've once belonged to that *sensei*."

"? Didn't you find it on the roof? Maybe someone else dropped it there—well, it's off-limits, though."

There was still the possibility that it was dropped by a worker installing the parabolic antenna or someone like that… But the fact that it was right above Room 333 was something to think about.

If you stood on the balcony of Room 333 and tossed it onto the roof, would it be able to reach around that area? But even if that were true, what would be the point of all that… Ononoki-chan had called it a "clever hiding place", but the crudeness of it felt more like it had been "thrown away" than "hidden".

Thrown away.

"If she threw it away, then the question would be, why did she

throw it away? *Oni* onii-chan, or for short, *oni*i-chan. Don't you think that figuring that out will help us find the next hint?"

I didn't think so… But I wasn't going to say that. Honestly, instead of such a roundabout hint, I would rather have something more direct.

I guess it was the professional way of doing things to patiently explore even the most unreliable and possibly irrelevant items… But it left the amateurs trapped in frustration.

Frankly, I wanted a more aggressive strategy.

"Don't you get the feeling that this stuffed bear was the only memorable gift that *sensei* received from her parents, who were on bad terms?"

"When you say that here and now, it feels more to me like that's not it at all…"

"Maybe she'd been unable to throw it away for a long time, but finally threw it away with some mixed feelings, and that caused the abused dolls to start moving…"

She didn't exactly sound serious… Well, even with that specific story in mind, it was still hard to understand the causal relationship.

It was true that stuffed bears were a common gift for parents to give their children… But not something like a key chain you'd find at gift stores…

"Couldn't it be *because* it's so small? What do you even know about parent-child relationships, *oni* onii-chan?"

"Don't attack me so suddenly. You don't need to get mad at me just because I didn't react well to your new discovery. Let's try to get along. Of course, if I knew any better about parent-child relationships, I wouldn't be here right now."

If I truly had been a specialist of child abuse, I would've responded more cleverly when I was first called out.

Even if she was a professor that was ten years older than me, I should have reported it immediately… I must have lost my mind after hearing that her three-year-old daughter was on the verge of death.

"*Oni* onii-chan, I bet you can't even begin to imagine the complex feelings of the parents' daughter, lamenting the fact that she only got such a bargain-level key chain and yet couldn't let go of it."

"By calling it bargain-level, it doesn't sound like you can imagine it, either…"

"It's something you couldn't possibly comprehend, *oni* onii-chan, considering you threw away the car your parents bought for you just because the tires went flat."

"I didn't throw it away. I'm definitely going to retrieve it."

"Weren't you the type of person who wouldn't forgive even a scratch on his collection?"

“I’m not that high-strung, and I don’t have a car collection. I’m not a millionaire.”

That said, this teddy bear felt a little too tattered…

“…Is ‘teddy bear’ what they call them in Switzerland?”

“All stuffed bears are called teddy bears. The country of origin doesn’t matter. With that in mind, the most famous bears are not from Switzerland but from Germany. However, the origin of the term ‘teddy bear’ comes from an American president.”

Even though her specialty was supposed to be immortal oddities, she sure knew a lot about stuffed dolls… Then, this little bear wasn’t particularly related to Associate Professor Iesumi’s country of origin.

No wait, her job as a teacher was to teach her native language —and Swiss German was one of them.

German…

“Would it be easier to understand as a watch? They say a Swiss watch can be used for three generations.”

“…What reason can you come up with for the professor throwing away her stuffed doll, which might have been given to her by her parents, on the roof?”

This amateur in parenthood was seeking help from a tween girl.

I turned the stuffed bear over and over, observing every inch of it.

Ah, I see.

I had felt that something was off about the way it looked, but this bear was missing an eye… There was a mark where a bead or something was sewn on. It was a wonder that the limbs were still intact…

“That’s why it was a ‘clever hiding place’. There was so much love and hate, or maybe just plain hatred—that she didn’t want to keep it within sight, and she didn’t want to keep it within her own territory, but she couldn’t bring herself to throw it in the trash. In that case, isn’t the rooftop the perfect place? Even though it’s basically like throwing it away, it was still a distance where she could tell herself that she ‘didn’t throw it away’.”

“Well, if you’re talking about wondering how to dispose of something that’s difficult to keep, throw away, or destroy—then, well, I can sympathize… I used to hide my reference books in my sister’s room, too.”

“Objection. Those ‘reference books’ were just porn mags. And your sisters’ room is the same room that I live in, you bastard. Don’t pretend you understand anything with that shitty example.”

“If they’re ever found, I can just insist that they’re not mine. I’ll

say that they're my sisters'."

"For the first time, I've started to doubt the love you have for your sisters. …*Oni* onii-chan, why not think of it like the braids you mentioned earlier?"

"I see… So it's that sort of feeling."

It was Hanekawa's hair, so I probably wouldn't just throw it onto the roof… But I certainly was at a loss as to what I would do with those braids in the future.

If I couldn't hold onto them forever…

In the future, how would I untie those braids?

"It's kind of uncomfortable to see you ponder about it so seriously. Well, we all have things we can't throw away. It's called hoarding. No matter how much you try to disappear without leaving a trace—no matter how much you try to cut yourself off from your past."

"Mmm… Well, Ononoki-chan, you're a specialist, so I'm sure there's something you can sense that I can't… But that could also be the sentiment of the person next door, couldn't it?"

"Even if it was, it's something we can find out by looking into it. Or did you manage to find another clue, *oni* onii-chan. If there's something else to analyze that should take priority, then of course we should look into that as soon as possible."

Another clue… No.

Well, to be honest, it wasn't that there were no other clues—in fact, the other clue was something I hadn't found in Room 333, but something I'd asked Meniko to decipher long before.

But with an oddity involved, especially an unforgiving one with killing intent, I couldn't exactly go to her for help.

I wanted to make it so that it didn't happen.

In that case, there was no choice but to rely on Ononoki-chan's way, whether it was going to hit or miss.

"…Just checking, Ononoki-chan. This stuffed doll isn't going to become an oddity or anything, right?"

I'd like to think that, since we were no longer in that room, it wouldn't meet the same requirements as my ski cap or jacket… But we still didn't know the fundamentals behind why the Iie-chan doll began to move.

I already learned that even a small stuffed doll like this could be fatal if it got stuck in my throat—but…

"It will,"

said Ononoki-chan in response.

"Or rather, I'll make it turn into an oddity. With my own hands. And I'll have it lead us straight to that intellectual *sensei*."

As someone who'd rather involuntarily become a vampire and been turned into a thrall, it was an idea that I could have never conceived of.

The idea of *creating an oddity*.

Even if she said it with the mood of, "I'm going to make an origami crane," I wasn't going to slap my knee and go, "So there was a method like that!"

If anything, it was such a shocking suggestion that it felt like I'd been shot in the knee…[28] After all, it took me so much effort to become human again, and to state it clearly, even over a year later, I was still suffering from the dependence, aftereffects, and rehabilitation from that experience.

Even though it may not seem that way…

"B-but, is it really okay to do that? Creating an oddity is a pretty big deal, isn't it? I thought that you specialists were here to prevent that from happening… I was sure it was some forbidden act."

"Yeah. It's a black that's pretty close to gray."

"So it's still black!"

"Yep. Well, everyone gets all spooked when they hear about how forbidden it is, but don't you think it'll end up being not a huge deal when we try it out?"

"Spoken like an idiot just before they make an irredeemable mistake!"

In the first place, Ononoki-chan herself was an oddity that was created—revived—through a taboo.

As mentioned previously, Kagenui-san and Teori Tadatsuru (then college students) bore witness to that revival, and thus sustained appropriate curses…

The curse of not being able to walk on the ground.

I was a college student like them, but I didn't want to meet the same fate as them.

"It'll be fine. For you, *oni* onii-chan, isn't it similar to the difference between a life surrounded by walls and a life spent on top of walls, right?"

"A life spent on top of walls? Speaking of which, my bigger little sister used to do that a lot, while doing handstands."

Although she didn't do that as much anymore.

Since she'd entered high school, she'd stopped going out in a jersey.

I wonder if she became fashion-conscious.

"Okay, listen up, Ononoki Yotsugi. Once upon a time, Shinobu

and I kept going along with a mood like that, traveled through time, and ended up destroying the world."

"The result of that is too extreme for me to use as reference. Besides, weren't you in a similar mood when you saved the dying Heartunderblade in spring break?"

"Hell no I wasn't! I was completely serious at the time, and it was a serious mistake!"

"Anyway, I want *you* to listen up. *Oni* onii-chan, are you so sensible that you'd get discouraged after one or two mistakes? What would you even do with that? How pathetic. Didn't we used to do stupid things together? Nade*kou* has also been making some mistakes recently, but she still hasn't gotten discouraged yet."

"I know it's not my place to say this, but what the hell are you doing with Sengoku!? Don't do stupid things with her! If you're going to, do them with me!"

"That's why I'm going to do this with you right now, *oni* onii-chan."

It's fine, it's fine—said Ononoki-chan, making an empty promise.

But I sensed nothing but danger.

"Though I say 'turning it into an oddity', it'll only be a temporary change. A temporary and restricted monstrous change… It'll just be like a *shikigami* making a familiar."

"A god making a demon?[29] What kind of situation is this… It definitely has to be forbidden…"

"Didn't you say back in the bathroom that you were 'ready to take anything on'? Was that a lie? Did you lie to me?"

"I didn't realize that even a lie of that level was unforgivable in our relationship… I meant that I was ready to take anything on, as long as it doesn't anger Gaen-san, doesn't destroy the world, and doesn't dissolve my certification as harmless."

"If this little bear once belonged to *sensei*, then you could say it was simply 'left for safekeeping' outside of the territory. In other words, it should still have the makings of an oddity. I'm just going to accelerate that process. When you make a vaccine, you induce a virus to grow, right? It's like that."

"It sounds persuasive, but is that really the same?"

I've often read stories in suspense novels about a virus that grows out of control and destroys the human race…

"Even if this tiny little bear gets out of control, I'll be able to take it down in no time."

"Those are the words of the researcher that dies first…"

"Nothing but complaints, huh, *oni* onii-chan. You should have a little more faith in me. You've hired a specialist, so just leave it to

me.”

“Even if you tell me to leave it to you in that monotone of yours…”

She sure had guts to say something like that after those acts of violence in Room 333.

She definitely wasn’t a specialist when it came to renovations.

“In the first place, creating oddities isn’t even your specialty, right?”

“That’s not true. Actually, there was a time when I used to live with a very skilled doll maker.”

Teori Tadatsuru, huh… Well, even if the only corpse doll he made was Ononoki-chan, he’d certainly made lots of other dolls as well.

“If you absolutely can’t trust me, then I don’t mind throwing things over to Teori onii-chan?”

“That would be a problem. When it comes to relying on him, he’s second to Kaiki in terms of how reluctant I am.”

“Rather than being reluctant, you just hate them, don’t you? But it relieves me to know that even you have someone you hate, *oni* onii-chan… I’m not trying to cover for my creator, but considering I was the one to blow up Araragi Tsukihi—wouldn’t you say there isn’t much difference between relying on me and relying on Teori onii-chan, who kidnapped your two sisters and your junior?”

The difference is marginal—but as she said that, even if it was true, it was still a matter of feelings.

It was a contradiction that Ougi-chan had heavily criticized me for.

“That guy’s still going after me and Shinobu, ignoring our harmless certification, as well as my sister, isn’t he?”

“It’s the same for me. I’m always thinking about killing all of you if I can get the chance.”

“I hate Teori. I like Ononoki-chan. These feelings of mine will not change just because my life is threatened. I’ll protect Shinobu and I’ll protect Tsukihi, so that I can continue to like you, Ononoki-chan. All right, fine. I’ll leave it to you. You’re free to do as you like.”

“How embarrassing.”

You’ve given me more faith than I was expecting—said Ononoki-chan, hiding her face behind her hands. It was a cute gesture, but behind those hands, I knew she was as expressionless as ever.

In the end, it felt like I was taken in by Ononoki’s smooth-talking, or rather, the cajolery of a specialist… However, as long as I didn’t have a plan of my own, Ononoki-chan had *carte blanche* to do anything she wanted.

It was true that, if I couldn’t count on her here, I shouldn’t

have relied on her in the first place. I didn't have any other choice, but right now, it wasn't like I didn't have another choice but to rely on Ononoki-chan this time.

This time, I chose, deliberately, to rely on her.

"So… What do you plan to do, specifically? Is it something we can do at this park? Or, if it's rituals, we can go to the Kitashirahebi Shrine…"

"Ah, yes, the well-known Kitashirahebi Shrine, where Nade*kou* writhed around in a school swimsuit."

"Don't make it sound like an indecent shrine."

"That place has already become spiritually cleansed, thanks to my all-around great efforts. It's no longer an air pocket or a hangout for bad things."

She was taking more credit than she should be, but that was certainly true… Plus, I had been the one who practically got in the way of those efforts.

"So it doesn't meet the requirements. Creating an oddity isn't just something you can do anywhere. You can't just go *pon*, *pon*, *pon* and pop out an oddity."

"I can only imagine you popping out an oddity like that, though… But, on the other hand, now that it's a shrine with a proper god, isn't it more suitable for ceremonies?"

"If that god finds out, we're doomed."

So you're trying to do something that will doom us after all… How about we don't do something that could get Hachikuji mad at us?

That's what I wanted to say, but after having expressed that level of trust, it was kind of hard to take it back, even as a man with no guiding principles… But, if we wanted to do it without Hachikuji finding out, then it probably wasn't a good idea to do it here in Shirohebi Park, either.

Or rather, it was a bad idea to continue this fruitless discussion here. Since this was where Hachikuji and I had first met, this park was practically her territory.

"Yes. We're going to use that concept of 'territory'."

"Mm. What? What do you mean?"

"If we assume that the abused doll and the clothes became oddities because Room 333 was *sensei*'s territory, then turning this little bear into an oddity should also be done in her territory."

"…So we're going to return there? By this point, a commotion has to have started by now."

"Even if there wasn't a commotion, we shouldn't go back there. If you're making a vaccine, you wouldn't want to use a virus with the same potency as the actual virus."

Well, yeah.

Even the flu shot was made up of an extremely weak version of the virus, injected so our body could produce antibodies… Well, I heard that even a weakened virus could make you feel unwell, so we couldn't be too careful.

"In other words, territoriality… The best place would be somewhere with a less 'private' feeling than her home. Do you have any ideas, *oni* onii-chan?"

"Of course, that would be her workplace. What about the office where I first talked with Associate Professor Iesumi?"

"Her office is still a private office, right? That's still pretty high in terms of territoriality… I'd prefer a more communally used space, where other people might go. Like her favorite restaurant, or something."

"The university cafeteria… But I don't know if Associate Professor Iesumi ever ate there. In the first place, we shouldn't be doing this around other people, right?"

"I don't really mind if anyone sees, though? What's wrong with showing off our relationship?"

"Don't act like we're on a secret date. …What about a lecture hall? The lecture hall where I take the associate professor's language course, that is."

"That would be too weak for territoriality. After all, there are a lot of other classes that go on, and isn't that more of the student's territory?"

That was how it was in university, huh… If it were a high school, I'm sure the classroom area would be fine as the homeroom teacher's territory.

"Darn, I can't believe that the fact that I moved onto higher education would come back to bite me like this… If only I were still a Naoetsu High School student!"

"If you still were, then I bet nothing in particular would happen. You'd live a life where nothing happened, except for breaking up with Senjougahara Hitagi."

How harsh.

But, again and again, I deeply realized that I'd taken on a request from someone I knew absolutely nothing about… I couldn't think of any territory for Associate Professor Iesumi at all.

I guess it was because she was that kind of person that she was able to disappear without a trace, except for a single little bear left on the roof…

"That's for sure. Normally, no matter where you disappear to, you would usually go home at least once to prepare yourself. The fact that she disappeared directly from work makes me think that she must have been preparing this for a long time,"

said Ononoki-chan.

For her, it was just an offhand comment, possibly not even something she really believed, but those words made it click for me.

“Ononoki-chan! What did you just say!? No, before that!”

“You didn’t even let me respond. What part? The fact that she disappeared directly for work?”

“No, before that—no, that was it. Sorry, sorry.”

“You’re just starting to sound like a guy that likes saying ‘No, before that’. But what is it?”

“How about inside her car?”

I asked.

“If you close the door, it gives off a private feeling, and even though it’s not a common place, she wouldn’t be in it all the time, so it’s not as territorial as her home or her office, right?”

“Mm… It’s not bad, but I dunno. That would mean we’d have to go back to the apartment, but is that all right?”

It would certainly be bad if we went back.

On top of the tires of the cars in the parking lot all having been slashed, my New Beetle was also parked there, making it an unfavorable situation. I didn’t think I wanted to return without wearing a mask of some sort.

However…

“If she disappeared directly from her office without returning home, then wouldn’t Associate Professor Iesumi’s car still be parked in the university parking lot?”

To make an unsubstantiated claim, as someone who didn't actually know Associate Professor Iesumi well, I didn't know if she commuted by car or not, and I didn't know if she left her car behind when she disappeared… If anything, if you think about it normally, you'd think a person would disappear using their car, if they owned one.

It was a very convenient vehicle, after all.

Thus, my previous statement was quite the careless statement, not backed up by anything.

However, if she wanted to completely erase her presence, instead of just simply disappearing, then driving a vehicle with license plates on the front and back was basically the same as traveling with a name tag.

Just like with her home, it felt like she would have left something like that alone, without getting her affairs in order… Maybe this line of attack had some merit to it?

I didn't expect things to go smoothly.

As long as we were expecting unpredictability, we were going to need an indiscriminate brute-force attack…

It seemed that, strangely enough, luck favored the kind of guy that liked to take detours without any plan in mind… The number of parking lots near Manase University was not small, including the one I usually used. Going through all of them would not be easy, no matter how mobile Ononoki-chan was—not only did we not know what kind of car Associate Professor Iesumi owned, we also didn't even know if it existed.

But, even so (because I was afraid that Hachikuji might find out if we kept lingering at Shirohebi Park), I figured we may as well get moving, and headed to the campus of Manase University in its summer break ("Unlimited Rulebook"—I'd taken off my frozen cap and jacket). And when we arrived, I realized something that I hadn't expected at all, but of course something like that existed.

In other words, the campus had a parking lot for staff use.

It was far from my usual travel route, and even if I had passed by it at one point, it might have left my awareness as an area that had nothing to do with me as a student… It wasn't that I didn't know everything—there was nothing but things I didn't know, this university that I attended.

Not to mention, since it was summer vacation, there weren't many cars parked in the parking lot, which was just a plain asphalt lot with orange lines painted onto it.

It was sparsely populated.

If it was like this, then we'd be able to conduct a full investigation in a limited amount of time, and, if we were so inclined, we wouldn't even need to go that far… That was because there was one car that stood out from the rest. A car with a distinctly different disposition.

Or, rather than a different disposition, it just had a different color[30]… Basically, it was a car that had become covered in dust and dirt. Like an abandoned automobile… Is this what happens to cars that are left uncovered for just a few days?

Just because the owner disappeared and left it alone… It looked like it was originally a pretty expensive car, too—a foreign car with the steering wheel on the left side.

"Feels like the car's been abused,"

said Ononoki-chan—it was some harsh criticism of the owner, but an excellent statement. Only a tool could express such a thing.

It seemed that the statement that "homes quickly fall into disrepair when people don't live in them" could be directly applied to automobiles, as well… It also happened to be favorable for the ritual that we were about to perform.

"No security cameras here. Good, good."

I was basically acting like a criminal by now, but the fact that this car was not parked in a contracted parking lot was really the luckiest thing… It was unknown if the bizarre phenomenon of the blanket puncturing tires in the apartment building's parking lot was captured on video, but if we were caught on video tinkering with this abandoned car, it would totally be vehicle burglary.

But we couldn't just dawdle around.

If the owner of the car was not found, the car would eventually be towed away… I wanted to hurry up. In the first place, bringing a tween girl to a university campus could easily attract attention on its own.

"Seems there's no dash cam installed, either. All right, all that's left is to hotwire the car."

"Don't talk about things you can't even do. The only thing you can do here, *oni* onii-chan, is keep watch."

The tween girl made me into her underling… Well, it was true that I couldn't possibly attempt to cooperate in the creation of an oddity.

"But how do you plan on getting inside? Ononoki-chan. For the record, I'm not going to let you break a window, okay?"

"What kind of ruffian do you think I am? I wouldn't do something like break a windowpane."

And with that, what the god of destruction broke was the lock

to the trunk in the back of the car. While I was speechless, she slipped the little bear from my pocket.

"Then, see ya. Keep watch for about half an hour, will you? It's a job that only you can do, *oni* onii-chan. I'm counting on you."

She dexterously folded her body into the not-very-spacious luggage compartment and squeezed in like some girl that had been kidnapped, closing the lid from the inside.

I see, she didn't have to sit in the driver's seat or the passenger seat to perform the ritual… With the trunk lid closed like this, no one would be able to see what was going on from outside, so the choice of the trunk area was a pretty nice idea.

Even if there were no security cameras or dash cams, it took a certain amount of bravery to perform a questionable ritual in a car for half an hour—and for Ononoki-chan, the darkness inside the trunk was nothing to be feared.

I couldn't help but get curious about what sort of forbidden ritual was taking place inside the trunk to breathe life into that little bear (I could hear an odd wriggling sound—wriggling?)—but it was probably better for me not to know.

A careless guy like me…

I'd been told to keep watch so that nobody interfered with Ononoki-chan as she put her heart and soul into that little bear, but considering that a guy who wasn't even a staff member loitering around the staff parking lot was plenty suspicious, I almost thought it would be better if I joined Ononoki-chan in the trunk. The fact that she didn't give me the time to do so was probably because she didn't want me to learn anything unnecessary, on top of how cramped it already was in the trunk.

Despite all she said, she was a rather considerate tween girl… I guess she was leaving me out of the loop so that I didn't get cursed even more.

Certainly enough, the curses placed on me by my childhood friend were more than enough… Plus, she was the one that started this whole thing.

Oh, that lovely girl.

On the other hand, on the flip side, you could say that Ononoki-chan was just willing to take on that much risk—for a professional, it probably wasn't that big of a risk, but it still made me a bit anxious.

So that I wasn't just dragging my feet, I decided to at least act like an admirable student, industriously cleaning my professor's abandoned and dusty car—I didn't have any cleaning fluid or brushes, so I couldn't do much, but I could at least brush away the dirt with my hands. I even thought about using my ski cap as a towel, but decided

against it, thinking it would be a bad idea to clean someone else's car with something that was once covered with drool.

As I did so, I could see the inside of the car through the window, but there was nothing unusual about it—no stickers or decorations on the seats… Also, there were no stuffed dolls from a crane game lined up in the back seat or anything like that, either.

Well, even if I were to break into this car, there wasn't any sort of fabric that could come and attack… No, wait, was it possible for the floor mats to come flying at me?

"……?"

There, my hands that were wiping the windows paused—partly because my hands were getting so dirty that they were no longer useful for cleaning, but also because I had a strange feeling about the interior of the car.

As mentioned before, there shouldn't have been any cause for concern inside the car, and yet my attention was drawn to something… Unlike the third bedroom where that father doll lay, it didn't give off the impression of being a set. It didn't feel like a car displayed at a car dealership… It had the feeling of being lived-in, the feeling of being used.

Then what part of the car was bothering me?

If only I were the kind of person that could get flashes of inspiration. Then life would be so much easier… Although something like that seemed more tiresome.

If only I had a button to give me a flash of inspiration.

In the first place, there weren't enough things inside the car to worry about… Maybe this was the kind of thing where I was not worried about something "being" there, but something "not being" there?

But, the steering wheel was there, the accelerator and the brake were there… The back mirror was there, the gear shift was there, the parking brake was there… Maybe something that wasn't so fundamental?

Was I just concerned about how the steering wheel was on the left side? But, my New Beetle also had its steering wheel on the left side, so I was actually pretty used to that—something my car had that this car didn't… Not only in the driver's seat, but also in the passenger seat—

"…Ah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah."

I got it, I got it. When I figured it out, it was almost shameful… Honestly, I didn't want to describe it. But now that I'd made myself so obvious, I couldn't just keep my mouth shut about it, even if it might not have anything to do with the main topic.

It was the passenger seat—the child seat.

In my New Beetle, the passenger seat was equipped with a child seat for Shinobu's use, but this car just didn't have one—because both cars had steering wheels on the left side, I was able to feel that sense of discomfort.

Good grief, what was I doing, getting all preoccupied in the middle of more pressing issues? In terms of the *mise-en-scène* of a child seat, there were more cars that didn't have them than did… After all, if you didn't have children, it wasn't an essential element at all—if you didn't have children?

But Associate Professor Iesumi was a mother with a three-year-old daughter…

Hm? No, "Iie-chan", the three-year-old daughter, was actually the Iie-chan doll… But if Associate Professor Iesumi thought that the doll was "her own child", then…

The doll was the target of abuse, so she didn't provide it with a child seat as part of the abuse? Well, that could be the case.

If it was locked up in a cage, then it wouldn't have had a chance to go out with her—but it wasn't locked up all the time, and there must have been a time "before the abuse"…

Besides, it was a legal obligation to install a child seat, right? I liked the way Shinobu squeezed in tightly into that small seat, so I set mine up without regard to the Road Traffic Act, but when I looked it up when I bought the car, it was mandatory to install a child seat when taking a child under the age of six into the car—by the way, Shinobu's outer appearance was that of an eight-year-old.

There were even those who thought that babies shouldn't even be put into cars for safety reasons… But not even I thought that we needed to be that much of a stickler. While we're on the subject of the law, child abuse was an unforgivable crime in the first place… However, when I remembered the "remnants of affection" I felt from the nursery, I wasn't sure if it made sense to remove and dispose of the child seat because she didn't think of Iie-chan (the doll?) as cute.

Associate Professor Iesumi's abuse came in the form of abandonment.

That's why the fruit knife stabbed in the back was a clear contradiction—then, shall we assume the child seat was removed by someone else? But I was pretty sure that child seats were treated as oversized garbage in most areas… It was obvious that getting rid of one would be troublesome.

I'd been regretting becoming aware of this, but that regret was quickly changing into a different kind of regret… I had a feeling that if I continued to think about this, the end goal would be good for nothing.

Earlier, I'd wanted a button for a flash of inspiration, but now I

wanted a button to undo it—such a self-centered wish would normally not get fulfilled, but it seemed luck was on my side here as well.

If I hadn't used up all my luck yet, I would have preferred it if it took my side in a different scene than this one… Anyway, my thoughts, which I couldn't stop on my own, were interrupted by an external impetus.

When I noticed, it turned out that much time had passed, as Ononoki-chan said, "Thanks for waiting, *oni* onii-chan," and crawled out of the trunk.

"Rejoice, for the ritual has succeeded. Look."

But even if she told me to look.

The result was not exactly something I could rejoice over—when looking at the little bear doll standing atop Ononoki-chan's hand, and when looking at Ononoki-chan's face half an hour later.

This was the first time a change occurred in Ononoki-chan's face, which had always been expressionless—I wanted to opt for a description that was as appropriate as possible, but the more I twisted it, the more disturbing it became. So, to say it outright.

Ononoki-chan's right eye had been gouged out—turned into a hollow cavity. And.

In the face of the little bear doll wriggling atop her hand, her right eye had been implanted.

Thrall-making. Familiar.

The process of embedding a part of your own body into a doll to make it an alter ego—simply put, that's all it was, but it was still frightening.

Fear prevailed over amazement.[31]

Rather than devoting one's heart and soul, it was more like devoting one's flesh and blood.[32]

Since her design was that of a tween girl, I never thought that Ononoki-chan's appearance was scary, but now that she was speaking to me with one eye hollowed out yet still expressionless as ever, it was kind of horrifying.

It was both expressionless and not expressionless at the same time.

Although, it was probably more normal to be afraid of the little bear doll that was moving bizarrely like a marionette in Ononoki-chan's palm… No, don't get confused. A little bear doll with an eyeball embedded in it was plenty scary.

It was scary enough that I could even faint right here.

I'd noticed that the little bear doll had been old and both eyes were missing, but I didn't expect Ononoki-chan would try to "repair" the missing parts in such a way…

She'd created a bug-eyed monster, hadn't she.

"A-at this point, we really won't be able to make an anime out of this… Of course I wouldn't be able to participate in the ritual."

"Weren't you an eyeball fanatic, *oni* onii-chan? You're pretending to be scared, but really, your heart's skipping a beat at this eye socket, isn't it?"

"Don't try to push a preference worse than lolicon onto me. Eh? Did it really have to be an eyeball? Isn't it normal to use something like hair for making an alter ego?"

"Well, I'm not Sun Wukong. That would have been fine, too, but the centerpiece of this mission was to have the familiar guide us, so I figured using an eyeball was a good idea."[33]

"That's not a funny joke. What makes you think you can get a laugh out of me right now?"

"Your viewpoint."

"It wasn't my viewpoint that was wrong. It's my judgment. It was a terrible misjudgment to leave this to you."

"'The eyes, huh'[34], you say? Well, that's what you get from just five thousand yen."

I'd thought for sure that it was a clever line, but it turned out

she was cutting corners because of her fees… It was hard to come across a buyer's remorse as bad as this. As for "the eyes, huh," she was skimping on even the gags.

Well, in terms of pupils, I suppose holes were naturally a part of eyes…

"Damn, if it was going to be like this, I should've crowdfunded one yen from every person in Japan and paid one hundred million yen…"

"Don't talk about elementary school fantasies as if they're modern management techniques."

"But… Ononoki-chan, putting aside gags and fees[35], are you really okay? With that eye socket. Is that something you can fix later?"

"I don't need your concern. I'm a corpse, after all. This level of damage doesn't even hurt or itch. Feel free to shower me with thunderous applause. Or you can just rain down kisses upon this eye socket."

"Don't try to test my affections."

"Not to mention, I've been in a worse state when I played around with Nade*kou*."

"Really, what the hell are you doing with Sengoku?"

"It'll go back to normal if I put it back. In the worst-case scenario, if it doesn't go back, I can just become an eyepatch character."

"Don't try to change your character after all this time! You're already decked out just as you are, Ononoki-chan!"

"It's nice to hear that, but don't think that what you see now is all of me. I had an eyepatch during the war, you see."

"At the Battle of Waterloo?"

"*Non*. During the Ononoki War."

"There was a war with your name on it!?"

They probably wouldn't teach that in history class.

If it wasn't an irreversible change, then it made me a little relieved, but from now on, I had to make sure I didn't make any careless requests to Ononoki-chan.

She wasn't afraid to hurt herself.

I'd totally forgotten about what I was thinking about… Something about a seat? Or a sheet? Maybe a cooling sheet? I certainly wanted to cool myself down.

Well, to take my eyes off of Ononoki-chan for a second… Not as a gag—literally, take my eyes off of Ononoki-chan.

And look at the little bear doll that was infused with a soul through a horrible, squirming ritual.

Rather than a familiar, it felt more like some sort of talisman…

Huh? At some point, it disappeared from Ononoki-chan's hand?

When I looked, I saw that the little bear doll with the eyeball had jumped off while we were fiercely clashing, and that it had begun lumbering along the lines atop the asphalt of the parking lot… It looked like it was about to fall over, and when I thought it would, it held its head high and regained its balance.

Even its movements were frightening…

It felt like some new life form that human arrogance created from scratch through genetic experimentation… Of course making something like this would be forbidden. I would have to accept whatever punishment Gaen-san threw my way… Whoa, it came this way.

"Shall we give it a name? I might even get attached to it. This is something I just thought of, but how about Koyomi?"

"You should at least give it a name related to Associate Professor Iesumi, or even a name related to yourself."

"You sure are noisy, Koyomi #2."

"I'm #2?"

"Make way for Koyomi, Koyomi #2. Otherwise I'll demote you to #3. The navigation has already begun."

Huh… So it wasn't just wandering aimlessly, but already trying to return to its original owner…

At first I wasn't sure if it would work, but if the flying blanket was headed to Associate Professor Iesumi for revenge on its abuse, then it wouldn't be strange if this little bear doll had the same latent directionality… Rather, this doll was the only one here that was doing its job as instructed.

Look what Ononoki-chan and I have become.

"But isn't it bad that it's going so smoothly? I mean, it's a little bear doll with an eyeball, walking around in public where anyone can see."

"It's going smoothly, so we can gouge out some eyes for the trivial stuff."

"Gouge out some eyes for the trivial stuff!? You mean turn our eyes away from the trivial stuff, right?"

"I'll gouge out the eyes of anyone who sees it."

"I can't turn my eyes away from that. I'm going to tell Kagenui-san."

"It's something onee-chan often says, though. Come on, *oni* onii-chan, don't be silly. Just pretend you're Geppetto."

"You're assigning me one of the hardest acts of all… So basically, I have to act like I'm controlling a marionette with piano wire, right?"

"That's right. The setting is that we're both new members of a

circus club. I skipped a grade, and my specialty is riding the trapeze."

"If you're going to pay that much attention to the setting, you should've planned things out a little more carefully from the beginning. We're being way too haphazard."

"Speaking of haphazard, here. I found some mineral water in the trunk. I guess it's for emergencies in case of a disaster, but the fact that it's carbonated water does feel like a *sensei* from Europe. Hold onto it."

"? I'm not really thirsty, though?"

"Pour it on the bear if it starts going wild."

She was pretty hard on it after giving it a name, especially my name… She wasn't getting attached to it at all.

"Even if we do successfully find her, I'll feel morally responsible if the bear ends up finishing off that intellectual *sensei*."

"You wouldn't just be morally responsible, you'd be completely responsible!"

Once again, I realized how forbidden this all really was.

Although it already looked that way from the bear doll's wobbly movements.

Originally, with the size of the little bear doll being what it was, it wasn't exactly designed to be able to stand upright, let alone walk, and the eyeball attached to its head made its balance even worse…

"Employing a familiar is kind of like taking care of an animal. It's the owner's responsibility to take care of it, up to the point of killing it, right?"

"For a moment, I thought you were going to give me a lecture on taking responsibility for life or something, so I was going 'ugh' in my head, but Ononoki-chan, that's not quite right."

But true, "the weakness being water" was something I'd figured out a little while ago… So this familiar was no exception.

But this weakness didn't seem to matter to Ononoki-chan, who opened the lid of her own plastic bottle and gulped down the water—she must've gotten tired out from the ritual.

"Pwaah. Well, it's not chilly at all. Lukewarm carbonated water sure is peculiar."

"Well, it was in the trunk after all… Ononoki-chan, I thought about this when you blew away that father doll, but you're pretty cold to dolls despite being a doll, huh."

"Are you saying I'm the one who's chilly? But I'm not chilly, and I wouldn't say that.[36] It's not despite being a doll, but *because* I'm a doll. I don't even have normal empathy. No naive feelings of hating something similar to me. Did I act in a way that made you misunderstand? A doll is a doll. Isn't empathizing with dolls the

domain of humans? For *oni* onii-chan, and for the intellectual *sensei*."

"……"

I was flustered just by the sight of Ononoki-chan's eye socket, so it was hard to argue back. Empathy, huh…

"Are those thoughts what causes doll oddities to be formed?"

"Who knows. I don't think onee-chan and the others put that much thought into bringing me back to life—come on, if you don't keep up, we'll lose track of the bear."

"Ah."

I had thought it was just wandering around aimlessly, but I realized that the eyeball-attached little bear doll was slowly tottering forward, as if in a game of "Red Light, Green Light"… There was no way it could've made it that far at the speed it was waddling, but was it speeding up whenever I didn't have my eyes on it?

But, if it wasn't going to move at that speed, then the sun was definitely going to set on us… Especially since its stride was short, and it didn't seem to be able to fly like the Iie-chan doll.

"Right, I kept its functionality to a minimum. Like I said, it's a weakened version of the virus. You don't want it to go out of control or make more companions, right? It doesn't have any will or any feelings. If you want to think of it like this, it's basically a radio-controlled car."

"Then, instead of just following behind it, we should try to keep figuring out where Associate Professor Iesumi disappeared to."

It was better to think of it like a compass, not a state-of-the-art navigation system… The theory that it began to maneuver at high speeds when we looked away was intriguing, but we wouldn't be able to recover if we inadvertently let it run off into the wild.

Hm… Huh?

But, where was it going?

If it went that way, it would run into the school building… Was its intelligence suppressed to the point that it couldn't even avoid walls? In that case, it was a bit pitiful, but when I thought about how this sort of compassion was what put the world in danger, I suffered from a dilemma that I didn't need to suffer from—and then.

At that point, my cell phone rang.

I received a message. Actually, two messages, at almost the exact same time.

Holding the plastic bottle in my other hand, I pulled out my cell phone and checked the senders of the text messages, making sure not to take my eyes off of the eyeball-attached little bear doll.

It seemed there was good news and bad news—in other words, the senders of the two messages were Hamukai Meniko and Araragi Tsukihi.

When I checked the bad news (in other words, the message from Tsukihi), the star-laden message said that the hike ended with no bodies being found, so she really was going to go visit Nadeko-chan's house now, because she didn't want to lie to her best friend.

Sengoku.

I had nothing but apologies to offer you.

And now for the good news—no, based on the content, maybe I should classify this as bad news as well.

"Araragi-chaaan! I finished deciphering that thing you sent meee! Sorry it took me so looong! Full text belooow."

Even in text, her usual lax attitude came through. But below that, the message read,

"(* It contains some grotesque expressions, so prepare yourseeelf.)"

I couldn't help but think that the line of text was unusually unsettling for Meniko.

"……"

"What's the matter? *Oni* onii-chan. Did you get some kind of weird text?"

In response to Ononoki-chan's natural question that arose when I suddenly stopped in my tracks…

"It's a testament,"

I responded frankly.

"What arrived was *sensei*'s testament."

"? '*An'ya Kokoro*'?"

“To Araragi-kun.

“I’m leaving you this letter with peace of mind because I don’t think you, my proud student, have the language skills to be able to translate it.

“Now, where should I start? There’s so much to talk about, though.

“How exciting.

“But don’t take it too seriously.

“After all, my life has been full of lies. I’ve somehow managed to cheat and deceive my way through life, pretending that it was all real.

“I have no idea what it feels like to be up front about my true feelings. Isn’t opening your mouth to speak basically the same as lying?

“Just kidding. Even a claim like this, I’m not really serious about—I just thought it would be a good way to start this letter. It may as well be sleep talk.

“I’m pretty good at sleeping, you see. That’s the truth.

“I’ve spent my whole life sleeping, and I’ve spent my whole life dead—rather, I was never even alive.

“Because I’m a doll.

“Yes… I suppose I should begin there. If I’m going to confess.

“Araragi-kun, I’ve lied a lot to you in the short time we’ve known each other, so in order for you to forgive me, I want you to be able to sympathize with me first.

“I want you to consider the extenuating circumstances.

“I’m pathetic and pitiful, so I absolutely need you to think that you’ll forgive me… Well, I never actually considered it in that way, but maybe you’d be more easily convinced if I said it like that.

“You’d rather not think that you were tricked and taken advantage of by a crazy adult, right? It doesn’t sound very convincing to say it here, but I want children to be able to believe in adults.

“‘I don’t want you to become like me.’ It’s an old and oft-repeated line, but I wished that someone would have told me the opposite.

“‘Become like me. Life is fun.’

“I wanted to meet an adult that would say that to me… Oops, don’t worry. That doesn’t mean I’m going to say that you should become happy in my place.

“There’s no need to worry about that.

“Araragi-kun, I’m sure what you care about the most is ‘why I

chose you', and the rest may not matter at all to you, but I'd like to put on airs and save that answer for the end.

"I'll save the fun for the very end.

"Because, while it probably isn't a fun answer for you, I want you to read to the very end.

"One thing I will say, though, is that Oikura-san really isn't involved… Please understand that it's not her fault.

"Please be gentle to her.

"Now, it's time for class to begin. Enjoy."

“The person I respect is my father, and the person I respect is my mother.

“I have to say, it’s those college seniors on the job hunt that can answer the interviewer’s questions with those words that I truly respect and love.

“That I hold in high esteem.

“Somewhere inside me, I have the feeling that familial love is a wonderful thing. But, you see, it was only inside me.

“It wasn’t in the house.

“And it wasn’t in the cage.

“We talked about something like the cycle of abuse, right? You know, where you aren’t able to love your children because your parents didn’t love you… But, in that sense, my parents were fine people.

“They were a fine pair.

“They got their dream jobs, were active in a foreign country, and even obtained citizenship there… I believe they were respected and loved even by the people around them.

“They were a fine pair, and it was just that that pair couldn’t become a fine trio.

“Daddy was a pediatrician, and Mommy was a fashion designer for children’s clothes… I’d never really thought about it in this way, but in a way, they were both specialists of children.

“Specialists.

“And I think they were good at it. Daddy didn’t let me die, and Mommy used to make clothes for me all the time.

“Hagoromo is a pretty unusual name for my generation, don’t you think? It’s a name that Mommy gave to me. Meaning ‘a robe of feathers’.

“The legend of the *hagoromo*.

“I can go on and on about how they came to Switzerland, how they achieved success there, or perhaps even the romantic tale of how they met, but, yeah, I’ll stop here.

“I don’t feel like bragging about my parents. I wouldn’t do something so embarrassing. For reasons beyond just embarrassment.

“But, well, when I look back on myself, it’s like I’ve done similar things, in a similar position, right?

“I wonder if they’ve been through something terrible, too. I wonder if that’s why they gave me such a hard time.

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

“There’s a saying like that, right?

“There’s also a saying that goes, ‘The child is father to the man’—I’ll quote this saying again later, so remember it.

“Because I want you to warn me if I forget to do so.

“I said that it was time for class to begin, and I’m starting to use the same tone of voice as in my lectures out of habit, but, well, I’m not really qualified to teach… I say ‘habit’, but it’s really in spite of me.[37] I said it as a metaphor, but at the same time, it means exactly what it sounds like.

“If I’d been an honest person, I wouldn’t have been able to work at a national university. Even if you don’t manage to decipher this letter, Araragi-kun, I’m sure someone will eventually find out. That I was a fake teacher.

“Don’t get me wrong. My parents definitely loved me. Thinking like this could be a form of Stockholm Syndrome, and you might criticize me for being complicit in my parents’ actions, but still, even if it was a bit warped, I would say that was still love.

“Although the idea that parents will always be parents to their children, even if they are abused, makes me sick.

“At the very least, even though I had never attended any kind of school, not even for a day, I was still provided enough education to be able to teach at a foreign university. Although it’s a bit ironic to think that my longing for school was what made me a university professor.

“They did love me.

“But, they didn’t pay me any respect.

“Do you get it? In other words, they didn’t treat me like a human being.

“They treated me like a doll.

“They took care of me like a toy.

“I was a teddy bear to those two.

“Bears are cute, aren’t they? I wonder why they’re so cute?

“But, it’s only the children that are cute.

“Adult bears are scary. You can’t call them with ‘-chan’. You end up wanting to use ‘sir’ or ‘madam’.

“I’d like to say that only pandas are cute even when they grow up… But even pandas are cuter as children.

“Have you ever been told that, Araragi-kun? ‘You used to be so cute as a child.’ Well, children don’t grow up the way parents want them to. Like how characters move on their own in the culture of Cool Japan, I guess?

“Anyway, about my parents.

“About my home. About my cage.

“I was their little teddy bear… and they didn’t want their little bear to grow up so quickly. They really, really didn’t want it—they

wanted me to stay their adorable little baby forever.

"So.

"They stopped raising me."

“First, they threw me into a handmade cage. They carefully transferred me from a crib to a cage.

“You know how they say you shouldn’t keep a goldfish in a large tank? Because they’ll grow to the size of the tank.

“If you want to keep the goldfish small, you shouldn’t keep it in a tank that’s any bigger… Well, I figure it’s more like an urban legend, but that’s what they did.

“As specialists. As parents.

“To their own child.

“They imprisoned me in a meticulously calculated cage—not because the baby would move around and mess up the house, not because it was troublesome if the baby followed them around—but because they didn’t want me to grow taller or gain more weight than the length, width, and height of the iron fence.

“It was an act filled with love.

“It was an act filled with hope.

“‘I hope that Hagoromo-chan stays small forever.’

“‘Please stay cute forever, Hagoromo-chan.’

“I don’t really remember what it was like as a baby, but I surely had to have cried out because of such discomfort.

“It would have been a high-pitched scream.

“But it’s a baby’s job to cry.

“So as they watched me cry, they considered me the most lovely little thing—the abuse against me did not even involve discipline.

“They were trying to spoil me.

“It really makes you think, doesn’t it?

“What kind of upbringing did they have to have to become parents like that… Would it be comical to say that I wanted to see their parents’ faces?

“There should be four of my grandparents here in this country, but I don’t think I want to meet them… They’re probably not even alive.

“Well, if you’ve been trapped in a place for as long as you can remember, you’ll end up thinking it’s completely normal.

“At some point, I stopped crying.

“Because crying was a waste of water.

“Water was important. For the sake of staying alive. The only effort I could make of my own volition to stay alive was to ‘not cry’.

“So, after being trapped like a *foie gras* goose, unable to move, I was constantly stuffed with food, just like a *foie gras* goose—but of

course you don't think that, right?

"In fact, it was the opposite. I'm sure you can imagine.

"Daddy and Mommy didn't even try to nourish me. Because, if I did, I might grow.

"Breast milk was a no-no.

"I know I said I didn't remember anything from when I was a baby, but I can vaguely remember my mom in the kitchen, milking her own breasts and throwing away all the nutrients I needed to grow.

"I get that feeling. It could just be a false memory. Maybe, because it was a waste, she gave it to Daddy to drink. Sorry, that was an adult joke.

"All I drank was just water.

"But I wasn't badmouthing it by calling it 'just water'… After all, it was how I maintained my transient life.

"Just a transient life.

"But, since water was all I had to drink, you can pretty much guess what my food was like, right? Do you think you can answer correctly if I gave it as a quiz? It's a question that ninety-seven percent of babies can get right.

"At the very least, there was no need to wean me off of milk onto baby food. I didn't need to be weaned, because I wasn't even drinking milk in the first place.

"Basically, I was given nothing to eat.

"If you don't eat, you don't gain weight. Maybe I should put out a book called 'The No-Eating Diet'.

"How should I put it? I felt like I was almost dried out. Like a flimsy mummy that was nothing but skin and bones—like tanned leather. So it was like water brought me back to life.

"But it wasn't like that water was unlimited. So it was normal for me to not eat or drink… But, maybe once every three days, once every five days, once every week, once every month, I was given some fruit to eat.

"An apple, a pear, a banana, a tangerine, a melon, an avocado, or a durian.

"Daddy used a fruit knife to peel it and cut it to the size of my mouth. My mouth was small, after all. Like a puckered-up mouth, I guess? My teeth weren't coming in at all.

"Were you thinking that I was being fed something surprisingly nutritious?

"Indeed.

"Although, all I was fed was the peel. The apple, the pear, the banana, the tangerine, the melon, the avocado—the peel of those fruits.

"Being in a state where I was like tanned leather, all I did was

lick the peel that I'd been given.[38]

"Doesn't it sound like a tongue-twister?

"They say that the flavor of the fruit is concentrated near the skin, but I wonder if that's really true? At the very least, with that being all I ate, my limbs didn't grow very quickly.

"Mommy and Daddy's wish had been completely fulfilled.

"They made their dreams come true.

"I had become a baby that didn't grow.

"I kept the weight I had when I was a newborn.

"Of course, I was chronically undernourished, which made me prone to illness, and I suppose I was more of a handful than most babies. Daddy was basically constantly at home, giving me treatment…

"Mommy turned me into her dress-up doll.

"She made tons of clothes for me. Clothes filled with love. I was like a mannequin… I was immobile, after all. I could move even less than a mannequin. I was capable of wriggling around in the cage, but I didn't want to waste my energy on something so pointless.

"You'd be on the right track if you said I was playing at being a statue.

"Have you ever felt like you might die just because you turned over in your sleep? It's thrilling and addictive.

"And since I was such a frail person, putting on Mommy's clothes was draining… The clothes must have weighed more than I did.

"Well, my name is Hagoromo, after all.

"It wouldn't be strange if I was light enough to fly… By the way, what kind of story is the legend of the *hagoromo*, again?

"A man found a heavenly maiden bathing in a lake in the forest, stole her robe of feathers hanging on a tree branch, and forced her to marry him if she wanted it back?

"Amazing. There's nothing but crimes there.

"I can't help but wonder if there was a baby born between the heavenly maiden and the voyeuristic, larcenous, and blackmailing man. I don't know how it ends, but I sincerely hope it's not, 'And so the family lived happily ever after.'

"Anyway, I grew up just like the name my parents gave me… A life like cloth, flimsy and light.

"To sum it all up.

"In a cage in the corner of the room, I survived as the doll of a baby, never growing up—for over twenty years."

“I reached adulthood while still a baby.

“To be honest, I’m surprised I didn’t die. To think that I was a baby for longer than you’ve been alive, Araragi-kun—it’s hard to believe.

“Sometimes I wonder if it was all a dream… And I want to wonder if I had actually been raised warmly in a happy family.

“By the way, although I said I’d reached adulthood, the age of adulthood is different in Switzerland compared to Japan. Moreover, I’m pretty sure they never filed a birth registration, so I surely wasn’t even recognized as a person.

“At the very least, my neighbors hadn’t been aware of my existence… Apparently, there are countries in which it’s a crime if you don’t report hearing a child’s cries, but as mentioned before, I was an abused child who didn’t cry.

“Daddy and Mommy. Their abuse was most likely made possible due to their strong bond and their cooperative attitude.

“However, it seems their opinions clashed when it came to how they wanted to educate me—and, as a result, it saved my life.

“But it was only as a result. The process involved me getting stabbed in the back, you see…

“Daddy wanted to make me a child prodigy.

“Mommy wanted me to remain as a fool.

“In other words, Daddy wanted me to be cute on the outside and smart on the inside, but Mommy wanted me to stay a baby on the inside as well… In reality, it wasn’t so simply divided, and both of them probably had mixed feelings, but the basic attitude was that Mommy kept talking to me in baby talk, while Daddy tried to teach me the four languages of Switzerland.

“He was a doctor, so did he have a belief in education? Or maybe he was just infatuated with the baby genius archetype… The only exception to that strict ‘no growth’ policy was ‘education’. Behind Mommy’s back, that is.

“That ‘education’ eventually led me to my current job, but before that, one of the few things I’d been given was the ability to speak, which was what saved me. I’m sure that wasn’t Daddy’s intention, but children don’t grow up the way parents want them to.

“No matter how much I suffered from malnutrition, I wasn’t just in a daze for twenty years. No matter how much I thought being in a cage was completely natural, if I devoted myself to reading the example sentences for language-learning, I would end up learning what was outside the cage.

“There were even hints from listening to my parents’ conversations… If I could understand the language, I could talk. And if I could talk, I could converse. And if I could converse, then I could persuade.

“I set my sights on Daddy.

“Thinking about it, I was a terrible daughter, to try and drive a wedge between her parents… But if their cooperation was the key to their success in concealing my abuse, then I had no choice but to destroy that partnership.

“I didn’t think I could stop their abuse.

“But I did think I could make it end—it was about when I was a fifteen-year-old baby, or perhaps a little later. I began to beg my dad.

“‘Please kill me,’ I said.

“…I wasn’t being serious. I was just trying to appeal to his conscience.

“Well, that’s just what I’d like to say, but I probably was being serious. There was no doubt that I felt that I wanted Daddy to kill me if possible. That feeling was probably stronger.

“‘If you love me, then kill me.’

“‘Use that fruit knife to stab me.’

“‘I don’t want to be alive. I want to die.’

“Whenever Mommy wasn’t around, I kept trying to appeal to Daddy… The process of persuasion wasn’t very easy, and it took quite a long time, and I couldn’t even say it was successful.

“But, about five years after I’d begun to say that.

“Daddy finally stabbed me in the back.

“His love was real.”

“However, I didn’t manage to die there.

“In fact, the one who died was Daddy.

“After discovering me with a fruit knife stuck in my back, Mommy became frantic and stabbed Daddy in the face, and so he died tragically.

“And after that, Mommy disappeared… Or should I say she fled? Since she concealed herself after killing her partner.

“Though I failed to get killed, I guess you could say I succeeded in destroying the bond between my parents… And so, staff members at Mommy and Daddy’s workplaces visited the house, concerned about the two of them not showing up for work, and discovered Daddy’s dead body.

“They also discovered me, on the verge of death… Well, I had always been a baby on the verge of death, but now, with a fruit knife stabbed in my back, it was a ‘verge of death’ easy for even a beginner to understand.

“For what it’s worth, the only reason I survived was because of my malnutrition… Daddy, being a doctor, apparently aimed precisely for my heart, but apparently my heart was thinner than a normal baby’s? It was teeny? So the blade of the fruit knife didn’t even graze it.

“I wonder if it was good luck.

“I suppose the fact that it was from behind was another factor in his failure. If Daddy had had the guts to face me from the front, it surely would have been fulfilled.

“Both his aim and my desire.

“This isn’t about the legend of the *hagoromo*, but since nobody knew the two of them had a baby, there was a huge uproar—or not.

“I was unconscious and in critical condition, and they couldn’t get a read on the situation externally. They were also afraid that it would have too much of a negative impact on the public, so they kept it from reaching the news. Nowadays, it would be easy for that information to reach the Internet somehow, but back then, computers were not as common.

“Yes, that’s how long ago it happened. If I were to be more specific, it would reveal my true age, so…

“And just like that, I was admitted to the hospital and placed on absolute bed rest—not just because I was stabbed, but because I was so skinny and tiny that they had no idea how I was still alive.

“Finally, some peace for me, who’d been neither peaceful nor quiet.

“From there, my life finally began. The life of a baby doll, who was far behind in the race—about twenty laps behind. And even though I wouldn’t be able to catch up no matter how I struggled, my life still began.

“Days of nutritional intake and rehabilitation.

“It wasn’t easy, but it was a lot more luxurious than being stuck in a cage and not being able to move. I wondered if it was okay to feel like I was slacking off so much every day.

“I’m truly grateful to everyone at the hospital that took care of me… Seriously, I even wanted to stay at the hospital permanently.

“It was probably the first time I’d ever met anyone besides Daddy and Mommy, but I wasn’t a shy baby. And frankly, I wasn’t in a position where I could care about the other person’s personality or appearance.

“But, you see.

“Saying that I felt like I was slacking off was about ninety percent bluffing, but the reason I was able to press forward without getting discouraged was because I felt, ‘I had to leave the hospital as soon as possible’—why, you ask?

“Well, that’s because even though Daddy, who had failed to kill me, was killed—Mommy, who was the one to kill him, was still alive.

“So I had to escape.

“I had to run away from the runaway.

“I thought that Mommy would lock me up in a cage again… Or maybe she’d scold me for going against her love and growing up in a medical facility.

“It may sound strange, but I was more afraid of being scolded than being killed. After all, my mental age was that of a ‘twenty-year-old baby’.

“If I thought about it calmly, I would have realized that there was no way Mommy, wanted for the murder of her husband, would come to me just because she knew I was alive. But it’s hard to think calmly, isn’t it.

“But maybe I was in more danger than I thought.

“Maybe the reason they never publicized Mommy’s murder of Daddy and my survival was for my protection.

“A privacy policy that guarded you from your guardians was a theory a bit hard to accept… At any rate, I did my best to grow up in order to escape from Mommy.

“I kept thinking of places to escape to.

“At the very least, I had decided to leave Europe, but in the end I chose Japan because that’s where Daddy and Mommy were from.

“It wasn’t nostalgia.

“Having listened to their conversations, it seemed they’d either left their home countries because they couldn’t stay there, or because they were sick of it. I figured that no matter where in the world Mommy escaped to, she wouldn’t show up in Japan.

“…Although, if I were thinking calmly, I would realize it was shallow thinking.

“After all, because she’d run away from her home country in such a way, it was possible she’d make it her last resort.

“To be honest, I start to doubt myself. Maybe I really wanted to see Mommy again, and lay in wait in Japan, hoping that she’d come back to her home country?

“After failing to get killed by Daddy, did I want Mommy to kill me this time—or did I want to get revenge on her?

“Did I think that my life would truly be able to begin if that happened? Since I continued to write over my thoughts, I can’t say for sure what my mental state was at the time.

“In the end, my true feelings remain a mystery, but I decided to go to Japan as if I’d been led there. After I was discovered, I had naturally been granted Swiss citizenship, but I had no intention of coming back and decided to obtain a visa to become a permanent resident in Japan.

“For that reason, I got married.

“Marrying for the sake of residency might sound like a sham marriage, but that wasn’t what I did. What I did was much worse.

“Instead of a pretense, it was a forgery.

“I picked out a man who met the requirements and submitted a marriage certificate with his name on it to the municipal office—there were various requirements that needed to be met, but in short, he needed to live in an environment where ‘he wouldn’t notice if someone registered his marriage without permission’.

“It wasn’t an easy requirement, and it took a lot of investigation and research. In fact, I was almost caught several times and was forced to withdraw from my plans. But in the end, I was able to marry a man with the last name ‘Iesumi’ and successfully obtained the qualifications.

“Although it was a felony.

“Compared to that, falsifying my work history to sneak into a national university as a professor is almost cute.

“There’s nothing you can’t do if you’re desperate, even if it’s a crime.

“Of course, even my age was fraudulent. As stated above.

“It wasn’t just making myself look younger for a career.

“Beyond that, all I did was lie. Since the lies began from my

name, I had to lie in every aspect of my life. To live in this country, to live a normal life.

"After having lived in a cage, my second life had me enclosed in lies—I was living in a cage of lies.

"Honestly, I still don't feel like I'm alive.

"Sometimes I come to my senses and think, 'What in the world am I doing?' I wonder if this is what it feels like to be 'alive'.

"Or is this how it feels to be 'dying'?

"The meaning was uncertain. My life-death status was uncertain.

"At least I had been sincere when I was in the cage, interacting with Daddy, trying to get him to kill me.

"Those are my true colors. That's my true form.

"The true form of Associate Professor Iesumi, the professor you took classes from for half a year and then accepted a request from—but there was no true form in the first place.

"I was nothing but an illusion."

“I’m sure you’ve had the chance to look around the room, but no need to worry about that whole playing house. Although, I guess it’s useless to say that now.

“But I’m sure you’ve figured it out by now. That was like a reenactment of my upbringing.

“Don’t worry.

“I never once thought of ‘that’ as my real daughter, or even as a human being.

“I’m sure you’re thinking of it as creepy, scary, or unsettling, but it was more or less the result of trial and error.

“Or a failure of trial and error…

“It was inevitable because of the paperwork, but I had to act like a married person, after all—I rented a family apartment and tried to simulate a typical Japanese family.

“At least, I tried… But the results weren’t very good. All I ended up simulating was my past.

“I was just playing house, but it didn’t go very well.

“I can even say that my parents did much better than I did. I didn’t even last three years, let alone twenty.

“I created that ‘daughter’ with the intention of loving it properly, but in just two years, I couldn’t love it at all.

“I stopped thinking of it as cute.

“As the size of the doll became less and less like a baby… I could no longer watch over its ‘growth’. After a while, all I could think was, ‘She used to be so cute’.

“Were Daddy and Mommy right?

“Were children cuter when they didn’t grow up?

“And… Araragi-kun, did you look in the next room properly? Did you find ‘my estranged husband’?

“It’s no good if you overlooked it. In the future, you have to do more than what you are told.

“I’ll confess that that was also, of course, my handiwork. As well as the recreation of the murder scene. Although the setting was not as elaborate as my daughter’s room. I have to say, I’m not too happy with the way it turned out.

“On top of my ‘daughter’, I couldn’t bring myself to love my ‘husband’… Well, of course. Daddy almost killed me, and Mommy killing Daddy was basically my fault, so perhaps, towards the living thing called a ‘father’, I had… What was it called again? Something-or-other.

“Right, that. Trauma. PTSD.

“Well, in my case, it wasn’t psychological trauma, but the usual, physical, trauma.

“With that in mind, perhaps what I was doing was not playing house or recreating the crime scene, but something like sandplay therapy?

“Though I wish I hadn’t done it.

“I ended up starting to hate going home—that said, Araragi-kun, I didn’t send you to my place because I wanted you to clean up my broken home.

“A teacher that forces a student to clean their house would get in big trouble.

“That wasn’t it. I was trying to get you to report it. I wanted you to be an eyewitness. In other words, it was evidence.

“The kind of information only the real culprit could know.

“Combined with this letter, there should be enough evidence… I’m sorry for being so mean in the beginning. Even though I provoked you so much, the truth is that I don’t think you won’t be able to decipher this letter, Araragi-kun.

“There are plenty of good translation apps out there.

“I just wanted to buy some time. Until I could get away to a safe place—after that, I wouldn’t mind having you publicize the letter.

“I’m not running away because I was caught abusing my daughter, and I’m not running away because I was caught abusing a handmade doll. It’s not something so dramatic.

“Shamefully, it seemed that it would end up being found out—the series of frauds I committed, starting with the false marriage. While doing my usual self-check as a routine part of my lifestyle, I found some mistakes I couldn’t recover from. Laws and management systems had changed before my very eyes.

“The trend of allowing foreign workers to live in Japan permanently is something that I truly appreciate, but for me, it’s a few decades too late… Rather, it’s that change in the wind that led to my crimes being exposed.

“I won’t complain, though. It’s a good thing, after all.

“I thought I had successfully exploited a loophole in the rules, but in the end, committing wrongdoings was bad. If I were to be found out, I’d get arrested. That’s why I ran away.

“I hate to say this because it sounds like a joke, but I don’t want to be confined in a cage anymore.

“I don’t want to be deported back to my birthplace, where Mommy is probably still hiding, and most of all, I don’t want to go back to being me.

“I don’t want to give up the persona of Iesumi Hagoromo that I raised… Though I’m sure I made a mistake in raising that persona at

some point.

"I'm attached to this name, like it's my own child.

"And so, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

"The child is father to the man.

"Like Mommy fled after the crime she committed, I will also flee—and, Araragi-kun, I want you to deliver this letter to the police and tell them about my apartment.

"I know I said I'd give you the answer at the end, but I think you've figured it out by now. The reason I requested this of you.

"It was true that Oikura-san told me you were the greatest professional of child abuse among the students of Manase University, but that wasn't the deciding factor.

"It's because you're the son of the Araragi couple, the prefectural police's greatest human rights caseworkers—I'm sure you hate being told that, but you really should be proud of your fine parents.

"She never said so explicitly, but Oikura-san once got in contact with you for that very reason, didn't she? Through you, she wanted to skip all the complicated procedures and appeal to the top brass of the police.

"I thought I'd try to copy her.

"That's it! Was what I thought.

"I didn't have the guts to turn myself in, so I figured I'd ask Araragi-kun, who had the strongest connections, to help me. I wanted you to assist me, a liar, into becoming an honest person.

"For once, I wanted to walk down the path of sincerity—and I may have wanted to avoid Switzerland's image being tarnished as a result of my crimes being exposed. I wanted to make sure this was disclosed not as an international issue, but as a family matter.

"I may be a criminal, but I'm not a bad person.

"I'm just a bit pathetic.

"It's become a rather long letter, but now that I've foisted these fuzzy feelings like the stuffing of a doll onto you, I feel better now. I guess I should have done that from the beginning.

"I'll leave the rest to you.

"I'll run away where no one can reach me—because I'm Hagoromo, a robe of feathers. I may not be a heavenly maiden myself, but I'm sure I can fly. Like a piece of cloth, fluttering in the wind.

"Aah, it feels like I'm going to heaven."

“It feels like I’m going to heaven—since I tied things up with such an unnecessary statement, is that how you found me here?”

If so, I was way too negligent, and that’s really pitiful of me—said Associate Professor Iesumi quite languidly, after we met for the first time in about a week.

I shook my head “no”.

“To be honest, I haven’t even read the letter properly yet.”

“Then please read it. It’s the letter left behind by a missing person, right? Even so, I didn’t think it would be deciphered so quickly.”

A testament.

That was not what Associate Professor Iesumi called it.

“Did you use an app?”

“No… Well, something like that.”

Well, I wasn’t going to tell her… The day of her disappearance, the letter she had left in her office had been discovered by me along with Meniko, who had accompanied me.

Not just four languages—she could probably speak over forty languages. Even I’d been surprised to find a college student who could speak Latin.

Even if it was a cryptogram mixed with Swiss German, Swiss French, Swiss Italian, and Romansh, it was nothing but a mental exercise for her… Well, she didn’t have a lot of time on her hands because of club activities and stuff, so she thought it took quite some time, but it was still a lot speedier than me tackling it myself.

The translation may have ended up a bit light-hearted thanks to her, but that’s something I could overlook…

“Didn’t you think I’d hand the letter straight to the police, or maybe even the university?”

“I can tell just by your quiz results that you don’t have the personality for something like that. Araragi-kun, you always try to fill in the answers to questions that you have no clue about, right? You don’t like to turn in an answer sheet that’s been left blank. You might rely on friends or apps, but I never once thought you’d relinquish a letter addressed to you without knowing what it said.”

“…If you can profile me like that just from my quiz results, you really are a good teacher.”

“Although I’m a fake. Can you answer my question? If you didn’t read my letter, Araragi-kun, then how did you find me here? In other words, the place I disappeared to.”

A little bear doll with an eyeball attached to it guided me here

—but of course, I couldn't say something like that. Instead, I said this.

"Associate Professor Iesumi, don't you have a habit of throwing things you don't need onto the roof?"

"Eh?"

Associate Professor Iesumi looked at me with an expression of bewilderment—but, in fact, this was the university building's rooftop.

As soon as Ononoki-chan's familiar collided with the school building, it began to climb up the wall just like that… Free climbing. At first, I'd thought it pitiful that its creator had not bestowed upon it the wisdom to circumvent obstacles, but I soon realized—the one who lacked wisdom was actually me.

I was the most pitiful one.

I should've noticed earlier that Associate Professor Iesumi's office was located in said school building—and that the office was on the top floor, just like Room 333 of the apartment building.

A university professor who abruptly disappeared.

The office was empty, and nobody had seen her leaving the school building. She hadn't gone home, and she'd left her car behind—but maybe no one had searched the roof of the school building, which was naturally off-limits, right?

It wasn't so much as a blind spot as it was the first place you'd cross off the list, saying, "That can't be it"… The idea that she was holed up in her apartment was still more plausible. At least at home, she would have had a good living environment and would be able to order everything she needed online—whereas on the school building, there was no electricity or even running water.

She would have zero lifelines.

It was unsuitable as a hiding place or a place to flee to… But if she wasn't thinking about living or surviving, then it was a different story.

If she was just trying to escape.

If she was just trying to escape from this world—then the rooftop was the best place to do so.

"Did you think I'd jump to my death? I want to ascend to heaven. I don't want to fall to the ground."

Associate Professor Iesumi looked emaciated and gaunt—she was leaning against the fence, and didn't even look at me until I called out to her.

To be honest, I thought I hadn't made it in time and she'd become a Buddhist mummy… But she was still alive.

Though it was dim, her consciousness was still there.

"I'm good at living without drinking or eating. To the extent that that's the only thing I'm good at."

With the fence behind her back, that fence looked like it was

part of a cage… It was as if she was still trapped. Trapped in the cage that her parents put her in.

But indeed, in this situation, there was no need to be afraid of her jumping off… I guess Ononoki-chan, who'd been on stand-by under the school building, wouldn't have her time to shine.

Incidentally, to prepare for any falling objects, Ononoki-chan had collected the eyeball from the little bear doll… This was because she wouldn't be able to catch anything without her sense of perspective. But it also meant that the little bear's life was much too short.

It would be a bit too arrogant to mourn its life, but even more so than its navigation to the rooftop, the fact that it was discovered on the rooftop of the apartment was more helpful in guiding me to this very location. So I couldn't help but be curious about its origin.

I'd acted like I hadn't read the letter properly, but the truth was that I had read it properly… There had been a point where she'd mentioned teddy bears, but she hadn't talked about this key chain itself.

From her reaction, it made me doubt whether or not it was something Associate Professor Iesumi even threw away… But, before that.

"In that case, would you like some water? Although it's carbonated."

"Hm?"

Associate Professor Iesumi strained to look.

She may have realized that the carbonated water had come from the trunk of her car, but she didn't say anything about it.

"I'll pass. If I drink water when I'm this hungry, I'll get refeeding syndrome."

That was her response—water shouldn't cause refeeding syndrome, but it was too heavy of a statement coming from someone who had experienced having water as her sole source of nutrition. But had I really just barely made it?

In fact, a considerable number of days had passed… As I recalled—the maximum length of time a person could go without eating or drinking was, yes, about three days.

Not to mention, it was the middle of summer, underneath the blazing sun.

There was no way I'd made it in time.

"No, no, you've done very well. Good for you. I'm sure your parents will be very proud of you. You've managed to capture a major criminal alive."

"…We can think about what to do later, but for now, why don't we get out of here? It's dangerous."

"Dangerous? Why?"

Because there might be a blanket coming to get revenge on you—or so I thought about responding, but I decided not to.

Since I managed to find Associate Professor Iesumi while she was still alive, it definitely hadn't been pointless, but after reading that deciphered letter, I realized it was a needless worry.

Surely, the Iie-chan doll had done nothing but escape—just as the mother had done from *her* mother.

That's right. Speaking of the letter…

"Sorry. From what I read of the letter, there's something I didn't quite understand… So was it you that stabbed the Iie-chan doll with the fruit knife, Associate Professor Iesumi?"

"Eh…? Stabbed what?"

For the second time, Associate Professor Iesumi looked bewildered… It wasn't that the term "Iie-chan doll" didn't ring a bell—it was as if she really didn't know what I was talking about.

I'd been thinking about adding onto that by asking who stabbed the father doll… But I guess I'll stop here.

In the letter, Associate Professor Iesumi confessed that she'd been the one to make the dolls, but she never wrote that she was the one to stab them.

The bear doll on the roof. The clothes that attacked.

The reason why there was no child seat installed in her car was because the existence of Iie-chan was false in the first place, and Associate Professor Iesumi's handiwork was limited only to her house… Though this major criminal had laid herself bare with this confession, there were still many mysteries left to be solved.

Not to mention, how much of the letter was actually true…? I didn't think that Associate Professor Iesumi was much of a liar, but there were quite a few things in there that didn't seem like they could be true.

But it wasn't my job to solve those mysteries.

All I could do was to fill in the answer sheet without leaving any blanks.

"Did I go wrong when I sought help from you, Araragi-kun?"

Associate Professor Iesumi, who was unable to stand up, spoke to me as I offered her a hand, but it sounded like she was talking mostly to herself.

Yeah, you could say that.

She'd mentioned in her letter that it wasn't her intention to ask me to clean things up for her, but as it turned out, instead of tidying up, I'd just about destroyed Associate Professor Iesumi's apartment and car as much as I could… If she had only listened a little more carefully to the rumors from my dear childhood friend, she would

have realized that I was a completely undependable and lazy son.

So, even though in my mind I agreed with her wholeheartedly, I changed my mind, as if that wasn't it at all.

"No. You went wrong when you tried to die,"

I answered.

It was a compensatory answer that was unlikely to receive any extra credit.

The epilogue; or perhaps, the punch line.

After yet another week had passed.

“So? What happened this time? If you’re okay with me, I’ll hear you out, Araragi-kun.”

“Oh, get lost… Hanekawa!?”

My former classmate who had set off on a journey wandering overseas after graduating from Naoetsu High School, Hanekawa Tsubasa, was sitting right in front of me—huh!?

What happened to Gahara-san, who’s usually in charge of the endings!?

“Hitagi-chan is going on a trip to Kushiro with friends from her dorm this week, so if I may be so presumptuous as to take her place.”

“She’s going to Hokkaido!? That Hokkaido that I have yet to visit!? With her new friends!?”

Don’t do things that will hurt your boyfriend!

Well, I was highly in favor of her expanding her circle of friends… But if she really went and ate crabs there, we might have to have a serious talk about breaking up.

“But, Hanekawa, if you’re taking her place… When did you even get back? How long have you been here?”

“I actually got back just now. Since it’s summer break, I thought I’d spend some time with Hitagi-chan, but she rejected me. She assigned me to you, Araragi-kun.”

It was also a bit of a shock to hear Hanekawa speak as if she had no intention of meeting me… But oh well.

I wouldn’t normally be a fan of breaking up the rhythm of our regular interactions, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t happy to be able to talk with Hanekawa—even if the subject was a tragicomedy about child abuse.

The location was, as usual, the cafeteria on the university campus—it was Hitagi who called me out, so I faithfully rushed over, thinking it was the usual thing… So this was quite the surprise.

Hanekawa Tsubasa, whom I hadn’t seen in several months, now had long, straight gray hair. It wasn’t braided, but it was close to the length that it had been when I first met her… However, she didn’t have bangs, so I guess she just kept growing them out. I didn’t know what country she just got back from, but her style, with her sturdy-looking backpack and hat, seemed like she’d just come back from climbing a mountain.

Her golden-brown skin made it seem as if she’d gotten a tan at the beach or something, but was that mismatched impression just how

Hanekawa was like, now?

If there was one thing that bore a resemblance to when we first met, it would be that, though she had been wearing contact lenses since the second term of her high school senior year, she had gone back to wearing glasses—it wasn't for the sake of changing her image or her character, but simply that it was more convenient for travel.

Thinking about it, wasn't this the first time I saw Hanekawa Tsubasa in plain clothes? Since she was no longer a high school girl, I suppose it was natural to see her in plain clothes… I hadn't been mentally prepared in the slightest, so even her mountain climbing clothes left me flustered.

I didn't know if I should call it a cameo appearance or a stunt double, but, well, maybe Hanekawa was more suited for the ending than Hitagi was, as far as this case was concerned.

Not just because of the character for "*hane*".

Although, that's where it all started.

"Ahaha, that's pretty careless of you, Araragi-kun. Anyone with the character for '*hane*' is usually good for nothing."

"They're good for something! There's something good for all of them! Don't involve the entire population of people with '*hane*' in their name just because of your own self-deprecation! As soon as '*hane*' shows up in your name, you're guaranteed to live a long and wealthy life! You score a hundred points in name-based fortune-telling!"

"Araragi-kun, were you always that defensive of a person…? I never said anything about economic conditions or life expectancy, either."

It's not like you get scored in name-based fortune-telling, too, pointed out Hanekawa in a dumbfounded manner—damn, after not seeing her in a while, it was like she was pointing out how dull I'd become.

Name-based fortune-telling, huh.

"You really know everything, don't you."

"I don't know everything, I just know what I know. Also, sorry about this, but we're no longer in high school, so if you don't mind, can you stop calling me 'you (*omae*)' so brusquely?"[39]

"We're totally not on the same wavelength!"

It was like a failed attempt at a nostalgic handshake—well, I guess such awkwardness is also part of what a reunion tastes like.

"I wouldn't say you've gotten dull. In fact, I'm impressed by how much you've grown. I never thought you'd save a teacher. I'd love to tell Hoshina-sensei all about it."

"Well, I really caused a lot of trouble for that homeroom teacher of mine… Teachers, huh… If I've become a fine person, then

what have you… Er, what have you (*anata*) been up to lately, Hanekawa?”[40]

“I didn’t think you’d be this awkward. I’m just kidding, it’s fine to keep using ‘you (*omae*)’. Well, I’ve finally finished the first stage of clearing out the mines around some national borders.”

The scale was way too different.

In that case, her mountain climbing clothes today might actually be work clothes, or more specifically, military clothes… In other words, I guess it was my fate to never see Hanekawa in plain clothes.

It made me feel like the adventure that Ononoki-chan and I went on was nothing but a small trifle.

“There’s no such thing as too big or too small when it comes to helping people. You’re not your sisters, Araragi-kun.”

“Now that you’ve said that, I’m sure even Ononoki-chan can rest in peace.”

“D-did Ononoki-chan die!?”

“Well, she was already dead. Well, I’ll talk about that later… I have things planned out, you see.”

“Surely not. It doesn’t seem like you’d plan things out, Araragi-kun.”

Well, maybe I hadn’t.

And that was true today as well.

“If you’ve only finished the first stage, does that mean there are still some mines left?”

“No, they’ve all been completely cleared out. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have come back. By finishing the first stage, I mean that I’ve been freed from my debt.”

“Debt? For what?”

“The debt from chartering a fighter jet to take down Ougi-chan the day before our graduation ceremony.”

Oh yeah, there was something like that.

I see, so while I’d thought that everything had been finished back then, Hanekawa had been suffering from debt hell ever since… Though it wasn’t as bad as my hellish spring break.

Still, I don’t know if you could say “as expected”, but she repaid her debt quite fast.

What an amazing girl.

“So, from here on out, Hanekawa Tsubasa is free to do whatever she wants… Free to clear out mines of her own volition.”

“……”

She was saying something pretty good, but it was kind of scary… When I was back in high school, I never thought I would end up worrying for Hanekawa’s future.

"So?"

Hanekawa asked, switching back to the main topic.

"What happened this time? If you're okay with me, I'll hear you out, Araragi-kun."

"There would be no better person to hear me out than you."

It had already been in the news, and since she was the class president that knew everything, I didn't think there was anything I could add. But I told her the full story in chronological order, without cutting anything.

"—Ah, I guess you're not a class president anymore."

"Well, I'm still a president. Of the International Landmine Removal U-20 Committee."

"That's insane. I never thought that my prediction that you would be a class president for the rest of your life would be fulfilled like this."

"But, I see, hmm. So it was something like that. You sure had a hard time, didn't you, Araragi-kun? But I think I understood most of it."

"You 'understood most of it' that easily, huh? The truth about the oddity incident that almost killed me several times."

"Did you really almost die?"

"By my estimate, at least twenty times."

"Don't exaggerate. It's an oddity story, after all. It could end up spreading."

At the very least, it was just once—when I was almost choked to death by my own clothes. At most, I'd say it was two times… With the time when I was locked in a cage.

I wasn't counting the two flights I made with "Unlimited Rulebook", since those were more like gags.

In that sense, perhaps I wasn't involved in that big of an adventure this summer… It didn't turn into anything like a demon-world-like summer vacation that could rival my hellish spring break and my nightmarish Golden Week.

Right.

In the end, this was reality.

"Honestly, maybe it would've been better if it had been you. If you were the one that Associate Professor Iesumi asked for help. If it had been you, you wouldn't have had the 'replacement child' misunderstanding when she first called you into her office, and you would have completely dispelled her suicidal impulses, wouldn't you?"

"Mm. Mmm. If it were up to the current me, I might have just let her die."

"……"

“It might have been impossible for the me of the past, too. The thought of helping an adult might not have even occurred to me… And I don’t think I could have remained calm in front of an abusive adult. You remember, right? What I did to the people who raised me. Although I’ve forgotten… So, Araragi-kun, you’re incredible.”

Even though she said that, it didn’t really feel like I was being praised.

If anything, I felt like a traitor. As if she was asking me how I remained so calm.

“I think all I could’ve done was call the cops at the very beginning, which would have complicated things further. So, Iesumi-san was right to choose you following Oikura-san’s recommendation. Isn’t that why Oikura-san told Iesumi-san about you?”

“Oikura would badmouth me to anyone.”

Even if her words becoming the catalyst ended up being a good thing… I couldn’t say that I had really been very helpful, just like with Oikura’s case.

Rather than being helpful, I was completely helpless.

At least, that’s how I felt.

“On the other hand, how much do you understand right now, Araragi-kun?”

“I barely understand anything. It’s the same as always, just me regretting that there must have been a way to do this better.”

In fact, the “past Hanekawa method” of reporting the abuse of the three-year-old daughter as soon as I heard about it wasn’t so bad… At the very least, Associate Professor Iesumi would not have to be admitted to a police hospital for malnutrition, in this gluttonous country of Japan.

Her consciousness, which was already hazy on the rooftop, had been completely lost at this point… The doctor’s assessment was that not only was she unconscious and in critical condition, it was unbelievable that she was still alive to begin with.

How was she still alive?

That was the one thing even the person herself didn’t understand.

I may have managed to save her life, but her life was the only thing I managed to save… Other than that, I hadn’t been able to save anything else.

The basic necessities of life—when I thought about how she hadn’t been given any of that, and about her life from this point on, it didn’t just leave me depressed.

“It’s no wonder Shinobu didn’t help me at all this time. What I was doing hasn’t changed from what I did back then. If there’s someone dying, I just can’t help but reach out to them.”

Shinobu probably had her own excuses… At the very least, it wasn't fair to say that she didn't help "at all". We hadn't made it to the parking lot in time, but once the sun set, it was her time to shine—when it came to the repairing and purification of Room 333, Shinobu had done a great job on all fronts.

"Wasn't Iesumi-san actually seeking help, too? She just couldn't say it like that in front of a child."

"What, is she a *tsundere*? An adult like her? I may not be a specialist of child abuse, and I may not be a specialist of oddities, but I am a specialist of tsundere. Well, it does make me feel a little better to think that way, even for a moment."

But I wonder.

I had also wanted to die in the past, and it was Hanekawa's words that had kept me alive at that time, which was what troubled me so much. Wasn't it just cruel to admonish a person who was suffering and tell them that "suicide was sinful"?

After being torn to shreds, it was like I was being attacked for wanting to die—wasn't that more sinful?

It was really hard to believe she was seeking help… That person may have just wanted to die.

"Then, if I unravel the mysteries that have been left behind, will that make you feel better, Araragi-kun?"

"Well, a little."

"Then, it might be a bit much, but this humble president would like to be of assistance."

Hanekawa grinned.

So that's why she was here—unabashedly showing up on a university campus that was off-limits to outsiders. Perhaps that was all according to my girlfriend's plan, as she looked forward to going to Kushiro.

But I wasn't going to let her off easy…

"Let's start off with something easy. How about the little bear doll on the roof?"

"Is that something easy?"

"I mean, it's a bear that's the size of a key chain, right? So wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that it was originally attached to a key?"

"A key…"

The only key that appeared in this series of events would be… The key to Room 333, Associate Professor Iesumi's territory… Was this about that key, which I'd finally been able to return to her that day on the roof?

"*Non, non.*"

"A, a Parisienne?"

“There’s one more key, isn’t there? There was a lock to the second door, as you called it, that could only be opened from the hallway side.”

“Ah… The door that Ononoki-chan kicked open.”

Aha. While I’d tried to fix the hinges on that door, I hadn’t performed a search for the key itself—and even in the subsequent (half-finished) search, I hadn’t found it.

“From the fact that it’s a teddy bear, isn’t there a good chance that it was attached to the nursery key? And then—there’s a good chance she threw it onto the roof.”

Thanks to Ononoki-chan, my imagination had gone in the direction that it was a memory of Associate Professor Iesumi and her parents that she couldn’t easily get rid of, but it could also have been a memory of Associate Professor Iesumi and the Iie-chan doll.

…And she threw it away onto the roof.

Littering towards heaven, not earth.

“Since she didn’t find it cute anymore—right? Though, like Ononoki-chan said, you can get the feeling that she didn’t throw it away, but failed to completely get rid of it. Considering the damage to that bear, it would’ve been about a year ago, right?”

“……”

So she felt the same way about the key chain as she did with her “own child”… The key that was detached must have been used without a key chain, like the key to the front door, or else she would not have been able to open and close the nursery door.

In the end, considering that she confined the Iie-chan doll and then left the second door locked, she may have even thrown away the key onto the roof… Perhaps we would have been able to find it under the rubble from Ononoki-chan’s destruction.

That worn-out little bear.

In a way, it was also a remnant of affection, like the interior of the nursery.

“Even if it was a state of emergency, I would have felt bad if we turned the bitter memories of her parents into an oddity, but since it was a doll that Associate Professor Iesumi bought herself…”

“If it had been a gift from her parents, I think you would’ve been in big trouble, and not just in terms of your feelings. It would’ve been bad if it had been handmade, too—but Ononoki-chan is a professional, so I’m sure she wouldn’t make such a misjudgment.”

There was once a time where I created an oddity, too—said Hanekawa, lost in her memories.

Was she talking about Black Hanekawa?

No—it must be about Kako.

It was something that happened while I was away, so I didn’t

know all the details… But, regardless of good or bad, the fact that she created an oddity without even being a specialist made her one hell of a girl.

How long would I be able to drink tea at the same table with her, as she continued to raise her status as president *ad infinitum*?

"When it comes to Ononoki-chan, I gotta say I think she was making plenty of misjudgments… According to her, 'Ever since I came to live with Araragi Tsukihi, my clumsiness has shown no signs of stopping.'"

"Hm. Then, next is…"

"Can I ask something? It might be a little trivial, but…"

"You're talking about that, right? If it's a trivial matter, then you're asking why the weakness of the clothes and fabric that attacked you and Ononoki-chan was water, right?"

Hanekawa spoke as though she were completely aware.

"But, isn't it obvious if you check the contents of Iesumi-san's letter?"

"Um. No… That wasn't the question I had, but that's fine."

It seemed the definition of "trivial" differed for me and for Hanekawa… I didn't even care about something like that anymore. I'd crudely assumed that all oddities were fundamentally weak to water or something…

"Since they were oddities created by Associate Professor Iesumi, who was raised with 'water' as her 'staple food', the oddities' weakness ended up being water? But if that's the case, I would think they would grow even stronger when being doused with water…"

Like putting dried foods back into water, I guess?

No, when I found her on the rooftop, Associate Professor Iesumi declined the water I offered her… If you suddenly drink water after not eating or drinking, then was it fatal…? But then, what exactly would be the right way to treat such a thing?

"Rather than refeeding syndrome, maybe Iesumi-san just refused to be satisfied with water—"

"Satisfied?"

"Rather than your ski cap and jacket just becoming immobile after getting soaking wet, isn't it more like they drank their fill and fell asleep on a full stomach? Like a baby with a full tummy after being breastfed."

"……"

It wasn't their weakness—it was their staple food.

The feeling of not wanting to be satisfied was something I could understand… If the vampire on a hunger strike, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster, were here right now, perhaps she would have something more profound and more significant to talk about here.

“Breasts, huh… Have I unexpectedly become a man that enjoys raising children? It’s true that I’ve always been thinking that men should be more proactive in childcare.”

“Araragi-kun, when you say the word ‘breasts’ so wholeheartedly, it sounds like you mean something else.”

“So was that what you meant when you asked, ‘Did you really almost die?’ When I was in that crisis, it was more like a starving baby clinging onto me, so my life wasn’t actually in danger…”

“No, I think that was definitely an attack. Most likely, one made out of self-defense… Still, if it were me, I would have never put back on a jacket and ski cap that almost killed me… How afraid of hypothermia are you? You’re way too paranoid.”

When she said that, I couldn’t say anything in response.

But it really is scary, getting pulled along by “Unlimited Rulebook” without even a seatbelt…

“I would think that, when your clothes attacked you while your focus was on the destroyed father doll, they attacked rather systematically. Otherwise, the professional Ononoki-chan probably would not have had a hard time. It wasn’t that opening the closet was the trigger condition, but rather they aimed for the exact moment that Ononoki-chan’s hands were full with opening the closet. So, what was the question you wanted to ask, Araragi-kun?”

Hanekawa came down to my level… It was an exchange that reminded me of when she was helping me study.

I really was a baby. Goo goo ga ga.

“Don’t say that as if you’ve resigned yourself to it. What kind of baby are you trying to be?”

“Rather than my question, it’s a doubt that Ougi…kun raised. The difference between the quality of the construction and the quality of the drawing for the Iie-chan and father dolls… Because of the imbalance between the balloon-art-like technique and the ‘*henohenomoheji*‘ scribble, Ougi-kun suspected that two people were involved in the making of the stuffed animal, placing the ‘estranged husband’ on the chopping block.”

Though it was Associate Professor Iesumi who locked up the doll, it was the husband who stabbed the doll in the back with a fruit knife—I had acted with that reasoning as a basis… No, it was more supplementary.

Well, unlike Ougi-chan’s deductions, Ougi-kun’s deductions were a bit more sloppy—or rather, it was designed to confuse the person he was talking to and cause havoc. So it wouldn’t be weird if it wasn’t necessarily correct, but still, that raised some concerns regarding the discrepancy between the construction ability and the drawing ability.

From reading the letter, it seemed that both the Iie-chan doll and the father doll were made by Associate Professor Iesumi alone… Could we just say that "Associate Professor Iesumi was good with crafts but had no talent in art"?

"Oh, something that simple… I mean, that really is mysterious. All right, let's think about it together!"

"You've gotten pretty bad at backing me up. Think back to the time when you were such a patient private tutor!"

"Ougi-chan—or rather, Ougi-kun? He didn't know about the existence of the father doll at the time, right? Then it made sense that he thought that way. But if he'd seen the doll on the bed in the next room beforehand, he would surely have thought something like this. 'This girl looks just like her father.'"

"…Aah."

Instead of thinking in terms of the creator being the same… If I thought about it in terms of parent and child resembling each other, then the "*henohenomoheji*" face being shared was completely natural… Though it was more of a folk belief that girls took after their fathers.

I'd thought that the "*henohenomoheji*" face was too lacking in either skill or affection for a stuffed doll made to represent one's own child, but if it was actually an imitation of the doll that was the father figure—but, if that was the case, we'd have to figure out why the face of the father doll was a "*henohenomoheji*".

Was it skill, or was it affection?

That was lacking—

"—I guess it has to be affection."

A forged marriage for the sake of a visa.

It was not a marriage for money or fame, but a marriage for citizenship, a marriage solely on paper—Associate Professor Iesumi, who did it all on her own, probably didn't even know what her spouse looked like.

Unlike the Iie-chan doll, who she at least tried to raise for two years, she didn't even give a name to the father doll.

All she wanted was a family register.

"Even if you can't draw a good picture, you can still draw a bad one—but something like that is just a paradox for people who don't know how to draw… Couldn't she have drawn on the face of her ideal man, or something?"

"She probably didn't even have any ideals. Or wanted to have any."

The letter had said that it was a simulation for the sake of pretending to be married… Of course, I assumed it meant more than that.

Some special reason why she had to do something like that,

like emotional attachment or nostalgia—but if it truly was nothing but performing a criminal act, then it was true that there was no need for ideals.

You could even say it was a hindrance.

Although, even in that simulation, she ended up failing—

"I suppose it means that even before she was unable to love her daughter, she didn't even love her husband. To read a bit deeper into it, she may have used her parents as role models… If she thought that the strong bond between her father and mother was the reason for her long years of confinement."

"…For the sake of loving the Iie-chan doll, she chose to 'separate' with the father doll? Although, since it's a doll, you can't really separate from him…"

Unlike the little bear doll, it wasn't big enough to be thrown onto the rooftop, either… For Associate Professor Iesumi, who had grown up in a cage all her life and never known the world "outside her house", it was probably inevitable that Room 333 had become her whole territory.

Her home, which had turned into a hangout for "bad things" like the former Kitashirahebi Shrine—a 3LDK of swirling emotions.

Her saying she was separated from her husband was not a narrative trick found in mystery novels—it was simply the biggest form of separation she could think of, as her knowledge only consisted of that strong bond between parents. She was at an absurd loss.

"Even though she had no choice but to do so, the fact that she destroyed those bonds from within the cage may have determined the rest of Associate Professor Iesumi's life. Maybe she left Switzerland, not because she wanted to get away from her mother, but because she wanted to escape from her sense of guilt."

Even if she was able to realize her great ambition of getting stabbed by her father after five long years… She surely didn't want to make her mother stab her father or even turn into a fugitive.

"…Ah, I see. I should've asked about that first. It's something that I asked Associate Professor Iesumi about on the roof, though I didn't get a clear answer."

A simulation that barely lasted two years, let alone twenty—with it becoming harder to love the Iie-chan doll, her arriving at separation and finally at neglect, let's just say it was another form of a bad ending different from reality. However, if there were differences between the "recreation" and reality—

"Then who was it that stabbed the father doll? As for who stabbed the Iie-chan doll… Was it Associate Professor Iesumi?"

If the doll-making was not a collaborative effort, but hers alone, then did that mean that Ougi-kun's theory about the abuse and

the stabbing was way off, and it was actually the same criminal?

It was that conversation with my junior that became the catalyst for my subsequent actions, so the truth or accuracy of the statement wasn't really important anymore, but…

"I think you can just think that it happened normally. What you first assumed, Araragi-kun,"

said Hanekawa.

"In other words, the father doll stabbed the Iie-chan doll in the back, and then the Iie-chan doll stabbed the father doll in the face."

"…That's not normal at all, though?"

Rather than it being what I first assumed, it felt like it was completely at odds with what I assumed… At that point, it wasn't even a recreation of what happened in Switzerland, right?

It was only when I thought that the "estranged husband" was real that I thought that it wasn't Associate Professor Iesumi that stabbed the Iie-chan doll. And there was certainly a time when I thought that the moving Iie-chan doll had stabbed the father doll, but after reading the letter and interpreting that Room 333 was a crime scene recreation, then I would've guessed that it was Associate Professor Iesumi that stabbed the father doll in the face.

The fact that the father doll moved and stabbed the Iie-chan doll… Well, it wasn't impossible. The reason Ononoki-chan destroyed the father doll on the bed was because she'd been wary that the doll would start moving—"just in case".

Thus, it wasn't impossible to assume that the father doll had already "moved", long before that… Rather, it could even be assumed that being stabbed in the face by the fruit knife caused that stuffed doll to "stop moving".

However, if you went even further… If Associate Professor Iesumi stabbed the doll in the face for the sake of the recreation (?), then the Iie-chan doll needed to have already been stabbed in the back.

The order of events was messed up.

Twisted up, like balloon art.

I'd certainly seen the Iie-chan doll stabbed in the back—in other words, I'd seen the fruit knife. At that point, the fruit knife was in the nursery.

As long as Associate Professor Iesumi was already on the roof of the university building, not moving the slightest bit as if locked in a cage, attempting to commit an impractical suicide—she could not have pulled out the fruit knife and stabbed the father doll in the next room.

Was it a remote-controlled trick?

If she used the oddity that controlled cloth, it wouldn't be

impossible… But I didn't think at all that my jacket and ski cap, the clothes in the closet or the carpet, and especially the Iie-chan doll were under the control of Associate Professor Iesumi.

The attacks had been extremely primitive.

It was true that, like Hanekawa said, the most suspicious of them all was the Iie-chan doll, who'd displayed a high learning ability… But if so, it would not be an accurate recreation.

Although, if you told me that there was no need for it to be an accurate recreation, then I wouldn't be able to respond… In the first place, it wouldn't have been a recreation starting from the fact that the country was different…

"You don't have to make it so complicated. Let's assume for a moment that it was indeed a recreation. In that case, what would be wrong?"

"…Well."

I wanted to say that trying to argue about what was right or wrong in that situation was already wrong, but that might be being too critical.

"Are you saying that it's actually the letter that was wrong? It was written in the narration, though?"

"Don't act like some clever reader of mystery novels. Also, don't say things as if the victim is always trustworthy."

It was something I wouldn't say, no matter what.

Narration or otherwise, the content of the letter was highly questionable—even if it wasn't groundless, it was a piece of writing meant to ascend to heaven.

From the beginning, heaven and earth had already been reversed.

It had even said something like she didn't really believe that the abused Iie-chan doll was her own child, but it was highly doubtful if Associate Professor Iesumi really, truly didn't believe that.

Though it surely wasn't a disease where she denied everything.

If anything, there were probably days she knew and days she didn't… Of course, even a guy like me had good days and bad days.

Even if the day she wrote the letter happened to be one of her best days out of the whole year, there was no guarantee that those three days she left the doll locked in the cage were at the same level of energy.

"There were probably some translation errors that came from deciphering from four different languages."

"There's no way. Meniko would never mistranslate something."

"Oh, that's some confidence you have in her. You should introduce her to me, that Meniko-san."

"Eh? Ah, all right, well, if the opportunity arises."

“So you’re trying to protect her not only from Hitagi-chan, but from me as well… You’re way too defensive of the new friend you made in college. It’s overprotective.”

However, *if the crime scene that was recreated was correct*, then how did we need to amend the letter’s contents?

If the Iie-chan doll escaping from the cage and stabbing the father doll was the correct version of events—

“Then was the one who stabbed the pediatrician father actually Associate Professor Iesumi herself, after being stabbed and escaping from the cage? As legitimate self-defense—”

No.

More correctly—it was revenge.

“—B-but, regardless of a doll doing it to another doll, there’s no way a three-year-old without any accountability could kill an adult, right?”

“It would be impossible even as dolls. But she wasn’t a three-year-old without any accountability, right?”

She was a twenty-year-old adult.

Declared Hanekawa—and that was right.

In the letter, she had written it as if she’d been a baby for twenty years, but that couldn’t be the case… Like how a bound foot can still grow, a person didn’t stop growing just because they were raised in a small cage.

As long as they were alive, they would grow.

Just like me.

“But… Hanekawa… Let me just say this one thing…”

I tried to come up with a counterargument as I spoke, but no matter what, I ended up being convinced.

With the words taught to her by her father, she ensnared her father and prayed for him to “kill her” over five years—but what if her ultimate goal was not to simply be stabbed in the back?

What if being stabbed was just a step in the process?

What if her objective was to *obtain the knife*—it made perfect sense.

And if there was something else that made sense, then the reason her mother fled… It wasn’t because she was the culprit that stabbed the father—the only assumption was that she was trying to flee from her daughter’s revenge.

She saw her husband killed by her daughter and ran away… She finally gave up on raising her daughter after twenty years of being there for her.

“There’s another way to look at the mother’s behavior. She’s still on the run in order to cover up for the crimes her daughter committed… As long as she herself is on the run as a murderer, she

wouldn't arouse any suspicion against her daughter."

"…So there's still love there?"

"A child will grow even without love. Like me."

She spoke rather defiantly.

"After all, whether she was three years old or twenty years old, Iesumi-san at the time could not be held accountable,"

Hanekawa continued.

That's right. Even if it wasn't self-defense, there was no way that case could be judged, whether under Swiss law or Japanese law.

Even if she was a fake teacher who had illegally infiltrated a national university and was a felon who would be imprisoned without probation, she would still be innocent of that one case. After all, who would remain normal after being locked up for twenty years? Even I had given up after just half an hour.

But Associate Professor Iesumi hadn't been given that "normalcy" since the day she was born… It was something she had no choice but to acquire herself, even if she had to lie to do it.

Experiencing the loss of normalcy was something I'd felt countless times… But what would it feel like to never have a sense of normalcy to begin with?

Locked up for twenty years—

"…Anyway, the last thing would be that. The number one mystery."

"Saving the question you want to ask the most for the end… That's a habit you've had since your high school days, Araragi-kun."

"Ah, because I'm a coward. I'm afraid to hear what the answer will be."

"Isn't it because you already know the answer to the question, even before you ask it? But, go ahead. I love it when you ask me questions, Araragi-kun."

"You love… Araragi-kun? If you're going to go that far, I guess I have no choice but to ask my final question."

"I think that joke is going a little too far for our current sense of distance. I'm going to tell Hitagi-chan."

Oof. Gauging our sense of distance was hard.

How does it go between you and Hitagi, Hanekawa-san?

Anyway, now that I've warmed things up with this lighthearted exchange…

"Fundamentally, is it even possible to keep a human being locked up, from when they were a baby, for twenty years—without letting them eat or drink?"

I wasn't a specialist of child abuse, and of course I wasn't a specialist of childcare… Calling myself a man that enjoyed raising children was presumptuous. However, no matter how ignorant I was, I

knew that a baby was a living thing that could die from the slightest mistake… A weak existence that could die even if you didn't make any mistakes.

Could that state have been maintained for twenty years?

The fact that her father was a pediatrician wasn't enough for an explanation… Or rather, I could sense from the letter that she was trying to avoid that question by mentioning her father's occupation.

The explanation that the blade did not pierce the heart because it was so thin was almost comical… If she was in such a condition, wouldn't she have simply died from even the slightest amount of blood loss?

It was unclear to what extent Associate Professor Iesumi intentionally or unintentionally embellished that letter… But it could even be a lie that her father was a pediatrician and her mother was a fashion designer for children's clothing. Those occupations seemed to fit too perfectly, as if balloon artists had twisted them into place.

"If you start to doubt that much, you won't be able to trust anything—but at least for that point, I agree with you, Araragi-kun. In Ononoki-chan's words, 'That's the first time you and I have agreed on something.'"

Unlike with Ononoki-chan, that statement might actually be true with Hanekawa… We'd been having a lot of disagreements because of the misunderstanding of distance, so I'd been preparing myself for the possibility that we might not agree even now, but…

"Yeah. I think she turned into an oddity. Iesumi-san herself,"

said Hanekawa, which was a relief… No, the statement itself wasn't exactly something to be relieved over, though.

An oddity.

Just as how the Iie-chan doll became an oddity.

Just as how the father doll, my winter clothes, and Associate Professor Iesumi's clothes and carpet became oddities—and just as how we turned the little bear doll into an eyeball-attached oddity.

If Associate Professor Iesumi herself was turned into an oddity by her parents—then she would be able to stay a baby until she was twenty.

Indeed.

After all, I knew a young girl that was six hundred years old.

I knew a little girl that was twenty-one years old, and a tween girl that had been used for a hundred years—therefore, a twenty-year-old baby wasn't too inconsistent for me.

If she herself was an oddity, it would have been even more strange if oddities didn't continue to form in her territory, Room 333—if they didn't attack the two trespassers like immune cells with self-preservation instincts, I would think that they were actually

sabotaging themselves.

It was a natural protection.

That would explain why I, a slowpoke, was able to make it in time—in other words, why Associate Professor didn't die even though she hadn't eaten or drunk anything for a week on the roof of the university.

If she was part oddity.

Then that wouldn't allow her to ascend to heaven.

Because for oddities, there was no heaven or hell.

"Her parents locked her in a cage and used her as a dress-up doll—that's more than enough to meet the conditions for becoming an oddity. I don't know how much of what she said were lies—but at the very least, she herself has no awareness of this one thing. Once she was out of the cage, she wouldn't have had a chance to use her abilities… After all, if she could use her skills freely, she wouldn't have needed to commit any crimes. It was when her crimes came close to being exposed that her defensive instincts began to run wild…"

However… The best example of this was the trespassing that Ononoki-chan and I often did, but weren't crimes basically about skipping due process and cheating to make things easier? It was disheartening to think that Associate Professor Iesumi's blood-soaked efforts were poured into a crime in order to obtain something that should be taken for granted, like human rights.

It wasn't just her parents. The world, the law, ethics, rules—everyone had neglected her.

They'd ganged up on her, and abused her.

Of course, distributing the fault among everybody was just evading responsibility by faking collective responsibility… Not to mention, she probably had people that helped her, too. Of course with regards to her rehabilitation, but her criminal activities would not have succeeded if there had not been someone that showed sympathy to her. However, even someone saying all these sympathetic things like me was probably contributing to the abuse of someone who was trying to make an effort.

Unconsciously.

If you get involved in a different way; if the person was not someone above you; if you were in a bad mood because you fought with a friend; or if you were irritable because you were hungry—you might find yourself saying that she should atone for the crime she committed against her parents, even if she could not be held accountable; or that it was too much to flee the country based on a strange assumption; or that she should have obtained a work visa the proper way even if it took a long time.

Unconsciously.

“Right. Unconsciously. Rather… Yeah, everything was just done unconsciously. Even if she was conscious of the fact that she was her father’s murderer and that her mother wasn’t really a murderer, I don’t think she would admit it… In order to protect the self, she abandoned it—like throwing it away onto the roof. She became so good at lying to herself that she completely fooled herself.”

When Hanekawa said it, the words seemed to hold greater weight.

Words as heavy as feathers, from Hanekawa to Hagoromo.

It could be said that she survived by becoming an oddity, but she couldn’t be saved from the fact that the source of the passion that turned her into an oddity was her parents’ love. The thing that killed her was the thing that kept her alive—so much so that she couldn’t even kill herself.

In that case, when I first spoke to her at the lab, she’d seemed like such a solid, decent adult that I couldn’t believe she was abusing her daughter—but that was probably because she felt so guilty about her position that she took great pains to make herself seem decent and solid. Wherever I go, it’s that same “using misfortune as a springboard” that I hate, huh.

“A cloth oddity—a *yokai* like the *ittan-momen* or the *shiro-uneri* or the *nikujuban*, perhaps? Maybe the power to manipulate fabric was a talent she inherited from her fashion designer mother. In Scotland, they say that each family has a unique tartan pattern. Well, when I became the *sawarineko*, it’s true that I never had any dreams or nightmares, but it’s still troubling that the person herself has no awareness of her oddity nature.”

“It’s not troubling. It’s her only salvation.”

Even though she thought she’d finally become human once she escaped from the cage, if she found out that she wasn’t—at that point, Associate Professor Iesumi would certainly give up on trying to live.

And I didn’t have the confidence that I would be able to stop her then.

“I suppose we’ve come full circle, and it’s time for the specialists to step in… Gaen-san should be able to at least seal away her powers,” I said.

That would be best.

I thought I’d successfully been able to break things off with that friendly onee-san, but it seemed my debts continued to increase… Since I no longer had the opportunity to pay off my debts, a ridiculous amount of interest kept piling up.

At this rate, I’d be forced to pay back a huge sum of money after graduating from college. It was a little too late to realize that I’d been set up… But since she could wait as long as four years, I guess

she really was an adult. Even though she was dressed like that.

A solid adult, huh.

"Speaking of specialists, Araragi-kun, the fact that you paired up with Ononoki-chan from the start this time surprisingly ended up being the best match. Nice *badi*—if it had been a 'replacement child' or a 'moving doll', it certainly would have been out of Ononoki-chan's area of expertise, but an immortal oddity is right in her strike zone, isn't it?"

That was a pretty fresh point of view.

It may be a bit rough to describe Associate Professor Iesumi as an immortal monster, but considering her track record of "not growing up" and "not dying" over a period of twenty years, it would not be an exaggeration to say that she had eternal youth.

In that case, we had better get it taken care of before Kagenui-san finds out—that violent *onmyouji* of justice might be the only one who would enact judgment upon Associate Professor Iesumi, for the crime of killing her father.

What in the world could have happened in the past to make her dislike immortal oddities so much…? Would the day I learned about it ever come? Was it related to the curse she received for creating Ononoki-chan?

"By the way, Araragi-kun. Now that we're on the topic of Ononoki-chan, are you going to tell me any time soon? You've managed to smoothly set it aside, but what happened to Ononoki-chan after that?"

Regardless of whether or not the topic of Ononoki-chan was brought up, Hanekawa somewhat forcibly placed the trolley on the rails of the corpse doll… Many things had happened in high school, but there shouldn't have been any direct contact between Hanekawa and Ononoki-chan.

What an admirable class president, worrying about a tween girl she'd never met.

Compared to that, I was good for nothing.

I'd said that I planned things out, but in reality, I just put it off because it was hard to say… Because, as her client, I felt a sense of responsibility for the treatment she received.

"When Ononoki-chan created that eyeball-attached bear doll… That oddity, it seems Gaen-san got angrier at her than I imagined. She scolded her so much that I thought even the expressionless Ononoki-chan would start crying. I said 'more than I imagined', but I can't even begin to imagine it. Gaen-san snapped."

"Th-that Gaen-san!?"

Hanekawa wasn't acquainted with Ononoki-chan, but she was certainly acquainted with Gaen-san, so even she was taken aback—I

was finally able to succeed in shocking Hanekawa.

Surprise.

If possible, I would've preferred to shock her with how much I'd grown—but, well, I understood how she felt.

There had been times where that onee-san had gotten mad at me and scolded me before, but she'd never snapped.

"Even though she didn't even yell at me when she saw me with a reference book that had pictures of an older woman that looked like Gaen-san…"

"Learning that fact makes me want to yell at you for it, Araragi-kun, but I don't have the authority to do that right now, so I'll just stay seated and keep listening. So what happened to Ononoki-chan? Don't tell me… She was disposed of?"

Hanekawa half-smiled and said it as a joke, but honestly, it wouldn't have been weird if that had happened—but rather, you could assume that Gaen-san unleashed her fury for the sake of avoiding that "disposal".

If it had been Kagenui-san that found out about it first, then as the "owner", she might have had to dispose of her *shikigami*… As Ononoki-chan had said, Kagenui-san was responsible for everything about her, including killing her.

If Gaen-san only flipped out as part of an exaggerated performance, then that would certainly be a kindness that was "typical" of her… But her style of using kindness and anger as tools of communication was rather incompatible with me.

But I'm sure that Gaen-san was defending not only Ononoki-chan but also me, so I had to approve of her way of doing things this time… Especially if I had to ask her to ensure that Associate Professor Iesumi was rendered harmless.

Maybe it was about ten billion yen?

The amount of debt I owed to Gaen-san.

It was as if Hanekawa, who had finished repaying her debts, passed me the baton of the debt king… A helpless relay.

"…Then, Ononoki-chan received a scathing lecture, but got off scot-free after that?"

"No way. Naturally, Gaen-san thought that a visible form of punishment was necessary, so for the time being, the problematic eyeball was confiscated from her."

I never thought she'd actually become an eyepatch character… It was way too visible, Gaen-san.

And, that wasn't all.

Rather than the confiscation of her eye, which would surely be returned to her when things calmed down, I would say this was a much bigger "disposal" from my point of view.

“The order was given for her to withdraw from the Araragi household.”

“Hmm. Hmmm. Hmmmm?”

“A restraining order was issued against me and Shinobu… And she was told to leave her current assignment immediately. In other words, this is the end of her long freeloading lifestyle.”

It would be a lie if I said that I wouldn’t miss her.

But she had stayed for longer than I’d expected… She started in February of this year, so about half a year?

It was another clever thing that Gaen-san was able to do. By punishing her, she was able to relieve her of her current duties… Instead of being sent to the penalty box, she was probably on her way to her next job. She probably couldn’t keep such a talented *shikigami* by my side.

By my side, with no problems at all.

“I see… I’m glad she wasn’t disposed of, but I wonder if the restraining order meant that Gaen-san realized the danger of keeping Ononoki-chan in the Araragi household, since she’s an oddity that’s easily influenced by her surroundings.”

“She’d have known that all along. Since she’s an onee-san that knows everything… Although you’re making my house sound like a danger zone.”

“But it is a danger zone, the Araragi household. It’s full of landmines, and as landmine committee president, it’s not something I can leave alone.”

Were you actually called the landmine committee president?

As for me, I was optimistic that this meant that the probation period for Shinobu and me was finally over… But the commander’s resources and strategy were yet unknown.

Her true intentions surely numbered three, or four… Or even a hundred or two hundred.

“And so, I gave Ononoki-chan a hug goodbye.”

“You didn’t really hug her, right?”

I didn’t.

I didn’t even get to say goodbye… Perhaps she inherited the personality of Oshino Meme, who wasn’t good with goodbyes, but after explaining the situation, the corpse doll departed from the house, as if she were only taking a break to go and buy some ice cream. It wasn’t like I wanted her to leave in a flashier way with “Unlimited Rulebook”—well, I didn’t want Ononoki-chan to leave in the first place, flashy or otherwise.

But, it’s fine.

It wasn’t like we were saying goodbye for good.

In a hundred years, we’ll bump into each other somewhere.

“Nevertheless, after being relieved of her duties, on top of losing one of her eyes, I’m sure Ononoki-chan will be tasked with something even tougher than living in the Araragi household… It’s pretty rare to get an ending where nobody’s happy.”

“Too bad. I guess that unraveling the mysteries didn’t serve as much of a distraction. But I didn’t come back to Japan just to see you all depressed, Araragi-kun.”

So, shall I bring you happiness?

Said Hanekawa with a roguish smile.

Like that of a cat.

“What a vicious joke. You can’t just go and misunderstand our sense of distance now. Regardless of whether I was influenced by Ononoki-chan, if I were a landmine, I would’ve exploded. Should I let Hitagi know?”

“It shocks me to hear that you’re taking it as a joke. I’m a specialist in helping you, Araragi-kun, don’t you know?”

“A specialist in helping me… What a crazy specialist. You’re not my babysitter. Well, if you insist, then all right. I’ll take advantage of your generosity and let you help me.”

“Have you thought about it? After locking you in the cage, where could that flying blanket have gone?”

“Dunno… If it was just Associate Professor Iesumi that turned into an oddity, and the stuffed doll was just one of her thralls, then I imagine it would run out of time at some point and turn back into a blanket—on the other hand, if it were recreating what happened, then wouldn’t it be in Switzerland by now? Like its mother, who came to Japan to escape from her mother.”

“Or perhaps, she went to visit Iesumi-san in the police hospital, sleeping as though she were dead—”

“To strangle her?”

“—To drape over her chest like a blanket, as though it were a baby snuggling up against her mother.”

“…Hanekawa, that’s…”

It was the most untenable hypothesis she’d made today—it was untenable, as a hypothesis, and even as just an idea.

It was almost repulsive.

Who in the world could relate to such a forced and contrived “happily ever after”? If “there are no parents that don’t love their children” were words that contained no love, then “parents are everything to children” were also words that contained no love. Even if it’s a baby’s instinct to cling to the mother—it seemed like a much healthier wrap-up to have the blanket slowly strangle her.

“There’s no way. For people like us, who are far from being bedtime stories… Did we ever once see such a happy ending that was

so meaningful?”

“That’s exactly why it’s about time something like this happened. If the simulation doesn’t pursue ideals, then reality will only get worse, you know?”

I suppose so.

Associate Professor Iesumi had been thorough in her simulation of the reality she knew, which was why she’d failed in both her marriage and her child-raising. As long as you learn from reality, you can only bring forth reality… It was an endless cycle of reproduction.

Even if it wasn’t there, even if she didn’t want it, what she needed to have were ideals.

Even if it’s run-of-the-mill to aim for the best and end up with the worst—if you don’t aim for the best, you won’t even reach the next best.

“But, even if you say that, it’s too—”

“No, no, I’m being completely serious. I’d like to think that I’m contributing to a world like that. I want the Iie-chan doll to stop the negative cycle of abuse begetting abuse. I want it to be able to clearly say ‘no’ to this unacceptable reality. Just as Iesumi-san wished.”

Despite being given the name for “helping”, it’s something I was unable to do[41]—said Hanekawa.

“Now, time for a multiple-choice question. Choose the one you think is the correct option, Araragi-kun,”

she said, as though she was recalling being my private tutor in high school.

“Choice A. While Hitagi-chan is away, secretly go on a date with me without any aftermath. Choice B. Go with me to visit Associate Professor Iesumi to check if the blanket is there. Now, which do you think is correct?”

“…I was wondering what you’d give me, but it seems the difficulty of this is C.”

I’m saved.

With those two choices, there was no way I could get it wrong.

Yotsugi Shadow

001

My relationship with Ononoki Yotsugi may have only just begun, but even so, I've come to understand a lot about her.

Her appearance was that of a twelve-year-old tween girl.

But her true form was the *tsukumogami* of a corpse used for a hundred years.

She was expressionless and monotone, yet eloquent.

She enjoyed chilled sweets like ice cream.

She seemed like she would even enjoy eating dry ice.

She was an immortal zombie, and she was a specialist in immortal oddities.

Her personality was whimsical, sarcastic, and condescending.

Her secret move was "Unlimited Rulebook".

As a *shikigami*, she served her master, the *onmyouji* Kagenui Yozuru-san.

And sometimes her master's senior, Gaen Izuko-san.

I had of course been a bit taken aback when she'd suddenly come in through the window, but after carefully interacting with her, my impression so far was that she wasn't as incomprehensible as the rumors suggested—if "nonsensical" was her identity, then I didn't dare try and tear that down. But if I could, I would like to be someone who could understand her, just as she was someone who understood me. That's what I'd been thinking recently.

But if I said that, she might make a sudden turn and tell me not to pretend like I understood her, acting as cold as ice cream or perhaps a corpse. But no matter. After all, snakes are tenacious creatures.

Like curses.

Now that she'd left the Araragi household, it was inevitable that she would start spending more time in my room. But let's see, I wonder what will happen next? Stay tuned.

002

As you may have guessed, society has transitioned into the period known as summer vacation, but as someone who had been a truant and a shut-in for quite some time, it had nothing to do with me. Remarkably, I had already forgotten what it felt like to attend middle school—but this meant I probably wouldn't be able to draw a school romantic comedy manga in the future.

How troubling.

But that was assuming that my dream of becoming a mangaka in the future would be fulfilled—but what was troubling me currently was that the road to achieving my extravagant goals had become closed off for construction. Otherwise known as a "slump".

My, my.

Simply put, it had been decided that I would be kicked out of my home that I grew up in as soon as I graduated from middle school (on paper), and the "reality" that I was facing in real time was, of all things, house-hunting.

My parents had told me that if I didn't want to go on to high school, I should go to work after graduation and earn my own money to support myself, and somehow I was able to find a way to do just that (refer to *Nademonogatari*)—but after realizing that I had established my own financial plan, my parents came up with a new condition, one that I'd never heard before, that of course I needed to start living on my own after graduation.

As a bonus, I needed to find my own co-signer—seriously, that's not a condition you give to a fifteen-year-old girl, right?

It was way too big of an about-face.

It was true that I was an aspiring mangaka, a shut-in, and somewhat of a deadbeat, but it wasn't like I was lounging around my parents' house day in and day out without working until I was over forty years old.

Their way of disciplining me was just too strange.

Or rather, even if telling me to work after graduation was fine, I could have sworn it was illegal, both under civil and criminal law, to tell a fifteen-year-old child to "leave the house after graduation".

"That's why I think they're just waiting for you to come crying to them after making those unreasonable demands. They must be pretty eager."

That was Ononoki-chan's analysis.

For some reason, she had recently become a character that wore a maxi dress and sported an eyepatch, but her words weren't wrong.

“I get the feeling that even if you meet all their demands, they’ll just keep finding more things to complain about. They’re probably just waiting for you to give up and start attending middle school, and then move on to high school.”

“That’s pretty harsh… The backlash from being pampered is intense.”

Putting aside the legality of things—as their only daughter, I suppose I had to recognize their efforts to make up for how much they’d been spoiling me all this time… If I were a parent and my child were to say that they wanted to abandon their education to pursue a career in art, I couldn’t say that I wouldn’t try to do something about it.

“Although I feel like you halfheartedly understanding your parents like that just lets them take advantage of you. You should just beat them up.”

“That’s domestic violence! That would be fatal!”

“You should learn a little from Araragi Tsukihi’s selfishness.”

Speaking of which, it seemed that Ononoki-chan was kicked out of the Araragi household for some reason—and she’d come directly to my place.

It made me happy, but maybe I was getting too attached to her.

“Tsukihi-chan’s an exception. When she was in elementary school and the teacher set the usual frightening conditions of ‘Okay, now split off into pairs,’ Tsukihi-chan objected, saying, ‘I work better on my own.’”

“That phoenix sure has plenty of dark episodes, doesn’t she.”

Incidentally, Ononoki-chan was (for now) visiting my house as a model for rough sketches, so she was currently posing at this very moment… As part of the series of masterpieces, her pose was of the “Grande Odalisque”.

The way the twist of her spine peeked out from her dress that exposed her back—it was exactly the same!

“So, what are you going to do? Wave the white flag? I can refer you to a ‘job’, but this isn’t a problem that money alone can solve.”

“Of course not. I won’t give up. I’ve heard that there are share houses for people aspiring to be mangaka, too.”

“How would a shut-in with stranger anxiety like you manage to live in a share house?”

“There’s also the option of wandering around different manga cafes every night.”

“You’d be lucky if you only ended up being told off by the police. Don’t forget. Your cuteness can cause crimes.”

I used to hate being called cute in the past… And I still hated it even now, but for some reason, I was okay with it when Ononoki-chan called me cute… It was probably because she was expressionless and monotone.

The other reason was that I could tell she seemed to be seriously worried about me… It was pretty thoughtless to speak as if the victim was the cause of the crime, but it was true that there was no need to step out into obvious danger.

It would turn into a sting operation.

"I've thought of the worst-case scenario… If I don't manage to find a place to go by the time I graduate, then…"

"Then?"

"I'll go crying to Tsukihi-chan and freeload off of the Araragi family. Apparently, Sodachi onee-chan did that in the past."

"That's even worse than the worst. Using the Araragi household as a shelter is not just an obvious danger, but a pitch-black one."

Ononoki-chan stood up. She stopped posing and took a daunting stance on top of the table… A daunting stance in that dress was pretty cool.

I wanted to make a drawing out of this, too.

"If you're choosing to owe a debt to Araragi Tsukihi, then I can only assume you have a desire to fall into ruin. Plus, I'm sure you don't want to see *oni* onii-chan's face again, right, Nade*kou*?"

She was more worried for me than my parents were.

What a good girl.

Although it was a bit twisted.

"Ah, um, yeah. But, well, it's probably fine now, kinda like there's no point in worrying about it so much. It'll work out somehow. If we run into each other, then we run into each other. I'll get over it."

"How easygoing you are. You really are a girl."

But I like that transparently pretentious side of you—said Ononoki-chan.

"However, even if I did leave the Araragi household, I'm still technically a friend of *oni* onii-chan. If you end up freeloading at their place just as I leave, then when I think about how uncomfortable it will feel for that specialist of child abuse, it warms my heart… I mean, it pains my heart."

"Specialist of child abuse?"

Is that what they were calling him these days?

It seemed he was as active as ever.

"Okay. For now, let's set aside the meddlesome expectations of your parents. I'll do something about your housing problem. If you buy some time by clearing their conditions, I'm sure you'll be able to

think up some countermeasures for your eventual parent-child confrontation."

"You really do spare no effort for me, don't you, Ononoki-chan?"

For whatever reason, she really was devoted to me.

"Don't misunderstand. I'm not doing this for you. If you really do end up moving into the Araragi household, then because of my restraining order, I wouldn't be able to come over and play with you. That's why I'm so devoted to this."

"Even the *tsun* of your *tsundere* is *dere*."

She was just *deredere*.

"Of course, I'm not going to make it easy for you. I won't make the same mistakes your parents did. I'll have you do some work for me, Nade*kou*—and if you can get both money and a place to live, it'll be killing two birds with one stone."

"Will I be able to use it as research for manga?"

"That's up to you. Now, get ready to go out, you shut-in."

"Hiya, nice to meet you, Sengoku Nadeko-san. I'm Gaen Izuko, the administrator of the specialists and an onee-san who knows everything. Can I call you Sen-chan?"

Even if I'd been told to get ready to go out, ever since I started my shut-in lifestyle, I was always spending my time in a jersey, so I could go out as I was without needing to dress up.

There was no dress code to restrict me.

In addition, I wasn't the type of shut-in that was weak to the outdoors, so I wasn't particularly opposed to going out… So I was a little excited to see where Ononoki-chan planned on taking me, but I was completely mentally unprepared to meet Gaen-san.

It was *that* Gaen-san!

Last time, she'd blown me off after I'd braced myself in preparation for our long-awaited meeting, so I'd carelessly assumed that we wouldn't have another chance to meet for a bit. And just as I'd let my guard down, this sudden development happened.

Ononoki-chan was intent on giving me quite the shock, huh—incidentally, she'd brought me to the capital.

And by the capital, I didn't mean Tokyo. It was just what I called the prefectural capital. It's something that was left over from when I was in elementary school and I thought all cities were called capitals whenever I read or watched the news—like how I thought a foreign country was the "Country of Foreign".

Our means of transportation was the "Unlimited Rulebook".

High-altitude, high-speed travel with me clinging onto Ononoki-chan's waist.

"You've sure got guts, unlike *oni* onii-chan. After we traveled, that lolicon would end up collapsing and being completely useless."

She was as harsh on him as she was kind to me.

Well, I *had* been a god at one point, and recently I've been training in various ways, so I've managed to become able to cling to Ononoki-chan as she moved.

It was very useful in saving on transportation costs.

However, seeing as Gaen-san had already been lying in wait at our destination, it seemed that this "interview" was not something that Ononoki-chan had suddenly come up with, but something that she'd made arrangements for in advance—though I had no idea why our meeting place was at a contemporary art museum.

Anyway, Gaen Izuko-san.

The onee-san that knew everything.

She was Oshino-san's senior, Kaiki-san's senior, and Kagenui-

san's senior—or at least, she was supposed to be, but honestly, she looked a lot younger than those three. Was it because of her smaller stature in comparison to that taller trio, along with her oversized fashion?

It almost seemed like she was trying to make herself look smaller than she actually was.

Oshino-san should be in his thirties, but Gaen-san, who was his senior and superior, seemed like she was in her twenties—and her early twenties, at that.

Perhaps she was naturally baby-faced, but I wondered if, on the other hand, this "youth" of hers was actually related to that "curse of wisdom" that Ononoki-chan had mentioned—well, I'll leave the disrespectful analysis at that.

After all, if there's anyone to be appraised here, it would be me.

That said,

"Please don't call me Sen-chan… That used to be an old nickname of mine."

That was something I had to say.

"Ahaha. You don't like remembering the past? When you were madly in love with Koyomi-onii-chan."

She stabbed at my heart with a smile.

She was a little like Tsukihi-chan—but, unlike Tsukihi-chan, this person probably knew what she was doing.

A crime of conscience versus a conscious crime.

Personally, I would say Tsukihi-chan, who didn't know what she was doing, was more evil.

"Then, let's go with Nadekko."

Considering she didn't give me an option the second time around, it seemed that the first time was a feint, and that Gaen-san had decided from the beginning to call me that—there was a structure to this conversation.

Nadekko?

"Then, how about 'Gaen-san'. Try calling me that? Go ahead? There's no need to be shy."

"G—Gaen-san."

"All right, now we're friends. Let's toss out any hard feelings we had in the past and get along."

We'd become friends in an instant.

Toss out any hard feelings we had in the past, she said… There were probably more hard feelings than I could count between me and this person.

I was a shut-in because I wanted to be, so I didn't necessarily want to place the blame on someone else, but I imagined the majority

of the blame, or at least twenty percent, would be on this administrator here…

Ah, well, we were in the same boat.

According to Ononoki-chan, I'd ended up making a mess of Gaen-san's plans, and it was because of me that Gaen-san had to cut ties with one of her juniors.

Since she was so readily willing to let bygones be bygones, it was rather refreshing—which meant I couldn't help but think that she was up to something.

"It's a bit sudden, but I'd like to ask for your help, best friend of mine. Your abilities have been certified by Kagenui, and Yotsugi can vouch for your character—there's no need to test you anymore. I want you to shine bright for me."

She was acting like some sort of hotshot idol producer… Putting Kagenui-san aside, what exactly about me was Ononoki-chan vouching for?

Although she'd disappeared ever since a little while ago.

"Ahaha, I gave her quite the scolding the other day, you see. I don't have a restraining order against her, but she doesn't want to approach me anymore. I don't really like being hated, though. Although, considering she wasn't such an affable *shikigami* in the first place, the fact that you were able to win her over makes you all the more impressive. Please lend me your ability. Of course, I will reward you—it'll be a give-and-take."

"A, a reward—"

Would I be able to speak properly to her?

Conversation was never my strong suit, and now that I've been cooped up for quite a while, "conversing with someone I'd met for the first time" was pretty new to me… And unlike when I hid my line of sight with my bangs, there was no way to escape from Gaen-san's eyes looking directly into mine.

"You're looking for a place to stay, right? I can arrange something. Due to my line of work, I have plenty of friends in real estate—I think I can help."

Her "line of work" was a bit intriguing.

After all, Gaen-san's occupation was, of course, being a specialist—an authority on monstrous apparitions.

"A friend of mine owns over twenty apartment buildings in the prefecture. As a matter of fact, even this building here is managed by him—so that's why I had Yotsugi bring you here."

As Gaen-san spoke with a grin, she pointed at the contemporary art museum—eh? An apartment building? Not a contemporary art museum?

I did a double take.

So this was what the capital was like…!

“D-don’t tell me, you’re going to refer me to this place?”

“No, no, that’s not it. This building may look a bit weird on the outside, but inside it’s quite the upscale place to live, so the rent is a bit high for your current earnings, Nadekko.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

There was the question of rent and so forth, but before that, I had zero desire to live in a building like this, which I could hardly believe adhered to the Building Standards Act. Not even in the future, if I were to become a best-selling author.

“So you see, in regards to this absurd apartment building, my friend is having a bit of a problem—”

Oh, be careful of heatstroke, said Gaen-san as she removed her angled baseball cap, putting it over my short hair.

What a people-pleaser.

“…I’d like you to resolve it quickly for me. If you do that, then I can arrange things so that you can rent out one of my friend’s relatively more normal apartments for a reasonable price.”

She'd said something about how she didn't need to test me anymore, but this felt like nothing else but another test—even though I was a shut-in, why did I, Sengoku Nadeko, have to repeatedly overcome conditions and examinations coming at me from all sides?

As for the apartment in question, it appeared as if the resident had just recently moved out—indeed, after going inside, the interior was that of a decent apartment, just as Gaen-san had said.

Rather than contemporary art, it was more like a designer apartment… Apparently, this particular room was one of the more luxurious ones, but after chewing on the words that Gaen-san had told me before we entered, this empty room evoked a different flavor.

Because, in this room.

Three consecutive residents had hanged themselves.

Aha, it really was up to me as to whether I could use this as manga research. If I got scared here and ran away, I wouldn't be able to do any research at all, and I wouldn't kill two birds with one stone.

With that stone, I'd just be making a few ripples in the water, and that would be it—so I had to show my resolve here.

In order to make a living, I'd chosen a second job, and it took place in the world of ghost stories—naturally, I would have to confront some scary situations.

But it was still the trial period, and this was on the moderate end of things. Even though I'd said that they'd hanged themselves, no one had actually died yet.

Gaen-san was quite the considerate person—with that in mind, I looked up at the high ceiling. It was from there that a chandelier dangled, and it was supposedly from that chandelier that those three people had dangled.

Fortunately, each of them was discovered by a family member or roommate, thus ending without incident… The key point was that these three cases occurred consecutively.

First off, from Household A, Alfa-san had been hanged. Then, from Household B which had moved in next, Bravo-san had been hanged. And from Household C which had moved in after that, Charlie-san had been hanged. That was how things had proceeded, and as of now, the room was currently vacant.

Every household ended up moving out immediately after one of their members was found hanged—as if trying to run far, far away from something.

Hmm.

It was possible that there was somebody who was hanging

them.

Also, even if it wasn't a famous suicide site, it was still possible for one to coincidentally follow another… But three-in-a-row was certainly strange.

It was strange, and it was bizarre.

Plus, even if nobody had died yet, that wasn't guaranteed for the "next time"… It had actually been a pretty close call for the third person. Apparently, he'd gone into cardiac arrest at one point…

"The place is on the verge of becoming stigmatized property. The owner was so troubled by his residents accomplishing failed suicides one after another that he decided to ask a specialist for help."

Accomplishing failed suicides was a weird way of phrasing things… But the fact that the residents had attempted to hang themselves one after another surely had to be an oddity phenomenon.

A cursed room.

It felt beyond my capabilities… I'd barely set foot into the world of specialists, so I felt that it was too early for me to deal with work involving people's lives, and I even told that to Gaen-san. I had no intention of exposing others to undeserved dangers for the sake of my own dreams.

"How sensible of you, Nadekko. It's a good thing to be able to feel remorse—but I'm not someone that forces unreasonable things on my friends."

You're the one that forced the seat of a god onto me, though… No, no, I shouldn't say that. There was no way that that was Gaen-san's preferred outcome.

Gaen-san continued.

"I'm asking this of you, Nadekko, because I believe this case fits you perfectly. I've taken into account the fact that you're a minor and a beginner—it may seem like an inappropriate request, but there's an appropriate reason for it."

Being slow on the uptake, all I could do was stare in puzzlement, but after hearing her specific reasoning, I was convinced.

As mentioned earlier, Alfa-san, Bravo-san, and Charlie-san had hanged themselves from the chandelier… Though they had no relation to each other beyond the apartment they lived in, there was one thing they had in common.

If one were to hang oneself using a rope, towel, or power cord, then even if their life was just barely saved, markings would still be left imprinted around their neck—but those markings.

They were bruises that looked like scales.

As if they'd been constricted by a snake.

"The *jagirinawa*—I guess it'd be a memory that's as distressing as it is nostalgic for you, Nade*kou*."

After having said what she needed to say, Gaen-san had departed from the room at hand, so Ononoki-chan had popped out from wherever she'd been hiding.

Her footwork was as fast as the racing wind… Though she was misusing that speed in order to avoid her boss that she had a hard time with.

Anyway, what she'd said was exactly right.

The *jagirinawa*.

Nostalgic, but distressing.

An oddity that had once wrapped itself around my body—in my case, it hadn't been just around my neck, but round and round every part of my body.

Bound by an invisible snake.

My body had become covered with scale marks.

"That's right. I remember how you looked, with bloomers and a hand-bra."

"Ononoki-chan, you weren't even there at the time!"

As I said that, I sat myself down in a corner and brought out a sketchbook and a pencil—I was planning on sketching this entire room, chandelier included.

A low-angle composition.

"But times really have changed, huh. Bloomers are hardly in fashion anymore. You don't even see them in manga these days."

"Kanbaru-san was certainly right to begin her conservation efforts early."

I was able to look back on those dumb memories fondly, but the *jagirinawa* was a whole other matter.

After all, it was a situation where it wouldn't have been strange if I'd died.

And thinking about that, that was where my life had been turned completely upside-down… There were various circumstances, and after all this time, I had no plans to blame my "friend" at the time for cursing me… But it wasn't exactly something I could laugh off.

I couldn't talk about it so easily.

"Wow, so you can even draw backgrounds and not just people, and freehanded at that. Nice, nice."

Ononoki-chan was taking a peek at my sketchbook—I had once hated having someone watch me draw, but I'd soon gotten used to it after Tsukihi-chan, having zero tact, had helped me out.

In this case, the room itself was the focus of the drawing, so it wasn't exactly correct to call it a background. Well, I guess it would be a background from a manga perspective.

"I thought I'd start by sketching out the cursed room… If there were any snakes here, I was thinking maybe I'd be able to see something by drawing it out."

Even if I'd been told to resolve the problem at hand, it was too vague for me to even know where to start, so I tried to make use of my special ability… Considering I'd already dropped out of school, I only had my artistic skills to rely on.

"A cursed room, huh. I did experience one recently. With *oni* onii-chan. I got through it easily, but that lolicon nearly died."

"Um, Ononoki-chan? You don't have to force yourself to badmouth that person, you know? You should cherish your friendship better."

"If you're calling him 'that person', I guess you still aren't over him yet?"

"It was a figara of speech."

"That's something I'm gonna have to find fault in."

I'd meant to say figure of speech.[42]

But anyway.

"Just for reference, Ononoki-chan. What was that cursed room like, and how did you get through it?"

"It was a room where a bunch of cloth came from everywhere and attacked me. As for what I did… I can't say I did anything except destroy everything. I even used 'Unlimited Rulebook' once to destroy the ceiling."

"I can't really use that for reference…"

I couldn't even copy her.

I couldn't exactly enlarge parts of my body.

"That's not true. You're still growing. From what I can see with my one eye, your bust is getting larger day by day."

"Where are you looking with that one eye of yours? I'm growing taller, too!"

"Good thing you're rapidly growing out of *oni* onii-chan's strike zone. But really, I can understand the feelings of the friend that cursed you. Even though you eat tons of sweets and don't exercise much, your belly isn't getting any larger at all."

Well, thanks.

That was just the constitution I had.

Although I'd heard that it was even more extreme for Kanbaru-san, having the type of body that would constantly lose weight if she didn't make a conscious effort to eat.

"The amount of exercise that Kanbaru Suruga does is really

something else. Meanwhile, it's not like you're going to become skin and bones, either… How cruel. You don't even consider how valuable that privilege is. It's like seeing a rich person that truly believes that life isn't all about money."

Though if you asked that rich person for money, they wouldn't even give it to you. Since they believed that money wasn't important, they'd say that you wouldn't really need it either.

"I wonder about that. I know that there are certain body types and constitutions suited for athletes, but I can't help but think that some medalists can no longer become mangaka because of those privileges."

By the way, I was terrible at exercising.

Though I could draw for hours on end.

"In any case, I have as little ability to defend myself now as I did then… If a *jagirinawa* were to attack me now, will you protect me, Ononoki-chan?"

"That's why I'm here."

What a manly response.

You nearly stole my heart.

"I won't let you get hanged from the chandelier. Even if this were a snake's den."

That was reassuring.

Back when I was a snake god, an oddity like the *jagirinawa* would be more like an underling… But even if it were part of a job, I didn't want to experience that agony ever again.

I had not developed a professional mindset yet.

I'd only gotten out of a victim mindset.

If I'd known in advance, I would have brought with me the amulet I used in the ritual back then… I'd missed my chance to give it back to Oshino-san, so it was probably still in my house. Somewhere. Probably in my closet. Although, amulets apparently had expiration dates, so I didn't know if it would still work…

"If you're planning on reenacting that ritual, then wouldn't it be better to get out of that lame jersey already and change into a school swimsuit?"

"I've grown up enough to learn that that was a prank by Kanbaru-san, okay? And what's wrong with a lame jersey? They're both worn in gym class."

"Nice try, coming from someone who's sitting still."

My hands were moving, you know.

Besides, it was just a quick drawing to get a full picture of the room, so I'd be done soon… A huge, empty room with a loft. The lack of furniture made it easy to draw… Though it wasn't very satisfying to sketch.

If there were any curtains, I could show off some technique, but there weren't even those… At least I could show off a little bit to create that feeling of transparency in the window panes.

There were other rooms, but the three victims had been hanged in this chandelier room, so investigating this room came first.

"The fact that all the hangings were concentrated in this room could mean that the other rooms' ceilings weren't high enough to hang from."

"…I'll ask just in case, but did any of the three have any reasons to commit suicide? Like, if they left a note…"

"Nope. All three were celebrating the primes of their lives, like, 'Being alive is the best!'"

"Primes of their lives" was surely just an Ononoki turn of phrase and probably an exaggeration… But it seemed none of them had left any sort of suicide note.

"Or rather, all three of them were tilting their necks in confusion about why they'd been hanged in the first place. Their necks with the scale bruises."

"…Did they have any idea that they'd been cursed?"

"Nope. None at all. Apparently, they all acted like they were upstanding people that no one could possibly hold a grudge against."

Was Ononoki-chan only ever nice to me?

She was being unnecessarily harsh to the people that may have gotten hanged by the curse of the *jagirinawa*—but if they had no idea about it, then it was somewhat different from my case.

"Considering that all of the residents immediately moved out after being hanged, it's possible that they did sense something. Ah, but, in my case, I guess my friend that had gotten angry with me just told me directly. Like, 'I put a curse on you!' Teehee, she really got me there."

"So you can laugh it off after all. How shameless. If you had reacted like that at the time—it probably would've made things worse."

"All right, done."

My drawing was complete.

It was a rough sketch, but I probably didn't need to go over it in pen… Not that I'd brought the tools for that anyway.

If I did say so myself, it wasn't a bad result, but only as a flat drawing… But it hadn't been able to meet my primary objective of having my hand move on its own in order to capture any snakes in the drawing.

I'd been able to capture the feeling of transparency in the window panes, but no transparent snakes could be found in the drawing… Hmm.

Well, I was still studying… Still training.[43]

I wasn't expecting everything to go smoothly from the beginning… Whether it was due to my lack of drawing ability or the snake being skillful at hiding, the first approach ended in failure.

There, there.

"You've sure got guts to console yourself after failing, Nade*kou*. I'm impressed. Now, what should we do for our second approach?"

"Why don't we try imitating the victims and hanging ourselves from the chandelier?"

"'Unlimited—'"

"That's not something you should use as a retort!"

It was a joke, a joke!

I'm not going to perform a copycat suicide, especially after people I don't even know!

"It might not end up being a joke. Because of how many lives are lost there, suicide sites can turn into power spots that induce death. Even here, with the first, second, and third victims, the damage from the curse has grown larger with each victim, just like your bust."

"That metaphor's a little soft."

"Just like your bust."

I appreciated that she was trying to keep me from being scared, but I couldn't exactly laugh… I was at the age where I didn't exactly hate boob jokes, but to sum things up, if there were to be a fourth victim from this room's residents, that person's life might actually be in danger.

Life… Losing a life, instead of hanging on for dear life.[44]

"Even if they don't die, if their brain goes long enough without oxygen, they'll end up suffering from the aftereffects. What can I say… Just as you get better at drawing with practice, this *jagirinawa* will get better at hanging the residents as the curses pile up."

"So we absolutely need to prevent there being a fourth victim. Well, even without actually hanging myself, I think there's still a way to use myself as snake bait."

"Leaving groundbait for that winding snake? How?"[45]

"You see, I've been cursed once by a *jagirinawa* before, so I figure I've built up some resistance to it. Like an immunization."

"Haven't you heard of anaphylactic shock?"

I've heard about it for bees, but does that happen for snake venom, too? The venom of the *jagirinawa* was effective even against vampires, though…

"Anyway, the client's request is that this gets resolved before a death occurs, so you have to follow that. Endangering your own life is completely unreasonable."

“Riiight.”
Then, shall I think about a third approach?
I flipped over to the next page of my sketchbook.

006

Household A (Length of residence: 3 years)
Father (Alfa)
Mother (Discoverer)
Daughter
A towel was used for the hanging.
Household B (Length of residence: 2 months)
Boyfriend (Discoverer)
Girlfriend (Bravo)
A power cord was used for the hanging.
Household C (Length of residence: 3 weeks)
Father
Mother (Charlie)
Son (Discoverer)
A rope was used for the hanging.

On the second page of my sketchbook, I wrote down an itemized list of everything I currently knew, as though I were making character sheets for a manga—as a trainee, I didn't have the authority to learn some of the more private details, so the information that Gaen-san had given me was somewhat lacking.

And though I'd already known, after writing out the information and adding some simple illustrations, I was able to realize something anew.

As a "veteran" of sorts, I could imagine quite realistically the pain that the victims—Alfa-san, Bravo-san, and Charlie-san—must have felt when being strangled by the *jagirinawa*. But that level of recognition wasn't nearly enough… I hadn't even considered the feelings of the victims' families, especially the one who'd discovered them.

Especially for Household C… How awful must it have been for the son who'd discovered his mother hanging and had to rescue her? For the sake of their privacy, Gaen-san had not mentioned the ages of anyone involved, but if he had been a grade schooler, he might suffer from PTSD for a lifetime.

It would be rough even for a middle schooler.

"Even I've recently been thinking, 'Go to hell!' to my parents every so often, but that kid won't be able to say those typical things in his head anymore."

"Thinking that your parents should go to hell isn't exactly typical, though… Well, taking into account the treatment you've been getting, I suppose it's healthy enough that you're not saying that you want to kill them out loud. Congratulations on entering your rebellious phase, Nade*kou*."

I couldn't say I'd received any proper ethics training, but I renewed my resolve to prevent another tragedy from occurring, for the sake of that child—although, all it said that he was a son, so it was possible that he was someone far older than me, someone in his thirties. Even so, there was no one that would stay calm after discovering a family member being hanged.

"But I would like it if I had a better summary of each individual case. I know that I'm still a rookie, and that I've made a lot of messes and still don't have Gaen-san's trust, but it's not like I'm asking for a copy of their family registers. I've heard that Oshino-san was quite blunt and persistent in prying into his clients' circumstances, you know?"

"That's just Oshino onii-chan's way of doing things. As for my

onee-chan, she doesn't even listen to people at all. And Gaen-san doesn't even need to hear them out, because she already knows."

"Mhm…"

"And despite already knowing, she might deliberately ignore them. After listening to a client's situation, a specialist might get too emotional to take the right actions, or even worse, they might get caught up in that situation themselves. If you want to avoid cases like the mummy retriever becoming a mummy themselves, it's safer to be ignorant."

"Like how people that can sense the supernatural can actually be weaker to haunted areas?"

"Yeah, like that—wanting as much information as possible is a royal road that only Oshino onii-chan can walk down, due to his neutrality at all times, against all others. And *oni* onii-chan is always failing when he tries to copy that."

If you think he's failing so much, you should teach him a few things… But that person certainly seemed like he would get swept up in others' situations and emotions.

"It might be important for you to maintain a clear vision of what kind of specialist you want to become. Speaking of which, with the way you like to think about things while making little notes and drawings, you're the same type as Kaiki onii-chan."

"Really?"

"With such a sinister face, he's pretty artistic."

A sinister face didn't really have any relation to artistic ability… But, sure, I guess? Was that why that con man was so understanding about my dreams, back then? Don't tell me he had aspirations to become a mangaka in his teens, too…

"I was too anxious to ask that question to Kaiki onii-chan myself, but it's surprisingly possible. Drawing out his plans for cons is like drawing out a story, after all. He plans things out by gathering data, using his imagination, and preparing lines for the characters that will appear—it was basically like that when he went to deceive you, right?"

"That's right… That person, he…"

I nearly lost myself in my recollections, but after thinking about it even more, it was the fault of that con man that I'd ended up getting strangled by the *jagirinawa*, too. I didn't want to stubbornly retread old ground, but I couldn't help my suspicions. Could it be that this snake's den was also a part of Kaiki-san's con game…?

"It's possible. That's a good observation."

She wasn't defending him.

Even though she called him "onii-chan".

"Coming from someone who nearly killed the person they

loved and called ‘onii-chan’. Both for Koyomi-onii-chan, and Kaiki onii-chan.”

“I don’t call Kaiki-san ‘onii-chan’, though…?”

“Even so, although that con man is a con man, he’s not a murderer… I don’t know if he’s the kind of person that would just curse someone to death.”

True.

Hanging the residents of this apartment wasn’t going to lead to even the tiniest profit—and it was unlikely that they were (failed) murder attempts for the sake of insurance payouts, since they were staged as suicides.

“I’ve heard there are insurance claims that pay out for suicides, but it’s still bizarre to have three consecutive suicides when there’s no connection between the residents of this apartment.”

“Three consecutive—”

It had been a part of the limited information I’d received.

Though I didn’t know the precise lengths, the residents had lived here for three years, two months, and three weeks—I didn’t know when the room had become a snake’s den, but it was easy to get the impression that the time it took for a resident to get hanged slowly grew shorter.

For Household A, it was possible that the curse only took effect after a single day, so it was hard to say for sure. But it did support the theory that the curse grew stronger the more it happened.

A death really might occur for a fourth case…

My arms trembled at the thought that someone’s life or death depended on my doodles… And they weren’t trembling with excitement. Well, the truth was that Ononoki-chan was there for me in case I messed up, and if she wasn’t enough, I assumed Gaen-san was ready to follow up… But it would be wrong for me to rely on that.

Since I was forbidden from performing the test of hanging myself from the chandelier, I could only guess at how the snake’s den worked in light of my own experience as a victim, as Gaen-san had hinted.

It takes a snake to know a snake.

Not a royal road, but a road of snakes—that was what I would look back on.

Right, first off, Kaiki-san the con man had come to my town and sold my former friend a curse—or rather, a charm…

“Huh? But the charm itself didn’t actually work, right? The curse itself was a scam. Then there’s no way Kaiki-san is involved in this.”

“That’s a good observation.”

You don’t need to bother with giving me hints, so just change

up your lines a little.

"But if you're going to draw anyone, then draw me. If you draw yourself getting hanged using your own artistic ability, I'm worried that will turn into a curse in itself. In that case, since I'm already dead, I won't die from being hanged."

"…That's a good observation."

I didn't want to draw my friend being hanged… But if I drew an unrelated third party getting hanged, that could turn into a curse as well, so I would have to depend on Ononoki-chan for this one.

Although, if I drew with such low motivation, it seemed unlikely that a hanging would actually occur… If only the invisible snake would show up in such a gloomy drawing, then that would be a wrap.

"It'd be a wrap after the snake wraps around my neck? How amusing."

"You aren't amused at all!"

"So instead of using live bait to catch that hanging snake, it'll be a lure instead. Can I make a request? Draw me so that I look like I'm writhing in pain. With my one eye bulging out of its socket. Then we can use it as official art for the anime."

"Art like that will just cause the anime to be canceled!"

It would be unrealistic, but I decided to draw the hanging Ononoki-chan with her eyes closed and a peaceful expression. As though you couldn't even tell she was dead… Well, she was already a corpse, so of course she would be dead.

Putting aside her expression (or lack thereof), I'd already drawn Ononoki-chan about a million times in every pose from every angle, so much so that I could even input her data into a 3D printer, so it was easy to draw her hanging. I could even draw her with my eyes closed. Not to mention, her maxi-length one-piece was remarkably easier to draw than her previous layered skirt.

I thought things over as I drew.

The *jagirinawa* that I'd experienced had basically gone out of control… Though it would normally have been a curse with no effect, I had ended up manifesting it at the focal point known as the Kitashirahebi Shrine.

I could hardly think that Alfa-san, Bravo-san, and Charlie-san had all followed in my foolish footsteps, three times in a row… In other words, the proper version of the *jagirinawa*'s curse must have been invoked in this very room, which made me curious as to the motive.

"What happened to the resident that lived here before Household A? There was no Zulu-san of Household Z that was hanged, right?"

“Right. The residents before them and the residents even further back were all able to move out peacefully and safely.”

“…Mhm.”

It was difficult to gauge how old this building was from its design, so I’d wondered if Household A was actually the first residents of this apartment, so that response was a bit unexpected.

So basically, if the room was a snake’s den right now, then there had once been a time that it wasn’t… Mm… Huh? Then, what if Alfa-san of Household A had done something to get him cursed by the snake? And that curse would have simply remained in the room and affected Households B and C as well—no, it was a convincing hypothesis, but there was no explanation for the step-by-step increase in the speed of the curse.

If I took into account only the events that occurred without any preconceptions, it would seem like Household B was more strongly cursed than Household A, and Household C was more strongly cursed than Household B—wait a second?

Turning that around, why hadn’t anyone except Alfa-san, Bravo-san, and Charlie-san gotten hanged? If I was going to think about how shocking it was for a child to be the one to discover his parent’s hanging, then I should shrewdly consider why the parents were not the one to discover their child’s hanging.

If this was truly a cursed room and a snake’s den, then there shouldn’t be any pattern to the targets—regardless of if they were a family or a couple, there was something suspicious and unpleasant about the fact that the victims’ attributes were spread out across “father”, “girlfriend”, and “mother”.

It made me feel a sense of unease as though the curse’s motive was less, “Anyone will do,” and more, “It was spread out on purpose”. Like that urban legend I’d seen online about a music player that would deliberately spread out songs to make it sound random when you shuffled the playlist…

“That’s a good observation. But just by saying you’d seen it online, you can involuntarily cast doubt on your credibility, so you should phrase it like this just to be safe. ‘It was confirmed via the Internet.’”

Ooh.

Nice correction.

It suddenly sounded like something from an IT department.

“If you want to sound even more convincing, you can say, ‘The accuracy of this information is yet to be determined, but after data mining from multiple sources, these are the facts that can be inferred at this time.’”

“Amazing… It sounds amazing, but all I did was surf the

web…”

“It’s half-convincing rumors that give rise to stories about oddities, so credibility isn’t actually a requirement, but if this were truly a cursed snake’s den, it’s abnormal that it wasn’t the whole family, or the entire couple, that was hanged.”

Calling it abnormal made it sound like she actually wanted them to be hanged… The hangings had only failed because they had been discovered, but why hadn’t the discoverers also been cursed?

Was there really a curse that only targeted one person per household? It wasn’t like this was some special sale at a supermarket…

“…All right. I’m done. I’ll call this ‘The Hanged Tween Girl’. For the hanging material, I went for a basic plastic tape.”

“Now that you’ve drawn it, it’s more gross than I thought it would be. That calm, resting face makes it look like I’m actually dead. Although I actually am dead. …And is plastic tape really basic? Since it’s such a commonly used tool, it leaves an even more gruesome impression… I’d just like to check, but you don’t hold any ill intentions towards me, right?”

“No, no, no, no. I like you a lot, Ononoki-chan.”

When Ononoki-chan showed her sensitivity for a moment, I responded in a flustered state—my drawing ability had ended up coming out in full force. I’d thought that my motivation was low, but when I began drawing, my hand really did end up moving on its own.

“You’d better tell me if you do have something against me. So that I can fix it.”

“Really, there’s nothing! Nothing but love, Ononoki-chan.”

At this point, it was less that I had grown attached to her and more that I was being haunted by her… Just like how this room was being haunted by a snake—but was it really being haunted?

I was quite satisfied with the quality of “The Hanged Tween Girl”, but yet again, it had not managed to depict any invisible snakes like some sort of spirit photography—it seemed even this fourth approach was a swing and a miss.

Not a “three strikes and you’re out”—I’d gotten to four strikes.

With nothing showing up after going this far, I was starting to think that it really was just a coincidence… Perhaps it was *because* it wasn’t a curse that things seemed so unnatural from a specialist’s point of view?

Though it was even more unnatural to believe that the hangings were completely unrelated to each other, and each victim had planned their suicide independently due to circumstances unbeknownst to me… Although it did explain why it didn’t end up as a family suicide.

"What about the scale marks that all three victims had in common?"

"Oh, that's right. Those were there—but could those have just been misidentified? Like, you were expecting to see it, so that's what it looked like to you… Like a Rorschach test."

Even as I said that, I knew that the argument was forced. It might be possible for someone as careless as me, but with someone as influential as Gaen-san involved, there was no way someone would make such a bonehead play.

On the other hand, the only direct evidence that (quite literally) entangled the *jagirinawa* to this case were the bruises around the victims' necks.

It would be one thing if we were still in my town that encircled the mountain on which the Kitashirahebi Shrine stood, but it was hard to see how a capital city like this could be swarming with snakes…

"Is that your intuition as a snake-catching master? Then I'll believe it."

"This isn't meant to be me complaining about how Gaen-san is testing me, but could it be that this is just a trick question?"

"A trick question?"

"A case where the correct answer is that there's no oddity involved. Even on school exams, you'll have questions like, 'From A, B, C, and D, select all statements that are true,' but A through D were actually all false, right?"

"Indeed, now that you say that, that does seem like the kind of trick Gaen-san would play. That's a good observation."

Was she stubbornly repeating that to make it a catchphrase for an eyepatch-wearing character?…

In that case, that wouldn't be a good observation.

"I'm not just trying to gloss over it, and I'm not just trying to make it a new catchphrase—that sort of judgment is crucial for a specialist to have. If you were to treat anything and everything as an oddity phenomenon, it would not only be dangerous, but also irresponsible."

Was this also what Oshino-san was trying to imply when he said that we shouldn't blame everything on oddities?

In that case, I shouldn't make a premature decision.

It was probably rude and disagreeable to try and read too much into the intentions of the examiner, but my life was on the line… If I answered incorrectly here, then I'd lose my job, be kicked out of my house, and end up on the streets.

It was a world of difference from a correct answer.

…Though I'd said some admirable stuff like wanting to prevent another victim or caring about the discoverer's PTSD, it turned out

that I was really just acting in self-interest to secure a place to live after graduation, which dampened my spirits a little.

"That's totally fine. You're not a god anymore. A sincere, selfless devotion is fine for *oni* onii-chan, or for short, *oni*i-chan, but it would be a pain if everyone was like that. In the end, Gaen-san judged *oni*i-chan's approach to be a failure, anyway."

"So he failed."

"For now, anyway. By the time he graduates from university, maybe that devotion of his will have grown up a little—well, *oni*i-chan's first step should be to move out of his home, too."

"That's for sure."

If he did that, then it would make it easier for me to live in the Araragi household—just kidding.

"So it's fine if you're a little selfish. It's fine to read into Gaen-san's intentions, and it's fine if you don't consider them at all. I may have said that you have to follow the client's request, but ultimately, even that doesn't matter."

"Um, I think that's going a little too far…"

Even without it being said, I was aware that I was already acting fairly selfishly by skipping school and trying to move out, but I couldn't go so far as to ignore the apartment building owner's altruistic desire to prevent deaths from occurring.

"It ain't altruistic at all. I won't deny that that's a part of it, but from the owner's standpoint, that's definitely not all there is to it, so you don't need to worry about it."

"? What do you mean?"

"What do you think I mean?"

For some reason, Ononoki-chan and I were bantering like a pair of lovers… Not to mention, I was in the boyfriend role. Maybe I should slam her against a wall? Using the Kuchinawa-san version.

"I'm the one asking, what the hell do you mean, hmmm!?"

…That's just domestic violence.

Heaven forbid.

"The owner said that he would be in trouble if someone were to die in this room. Because it would become stigmatized property,"

said Ononoki-chan.

Stigmatized property… Oh yeah, I remember hearing something like that in the beginning. If the hanged victims were to pass away, then the room would become stigmatized…

"Do you know what stigmatized means?"

What kind of idiot do you take Sengoku Nadeko for?

Of course I know, even if I don't know everything.

For any real estate in which there have been strange deaths (not limited to suicides)—whether it's an apartment or a single-family

house, and whether it's for rent or for sale—there's an obligation for that death to be reported, right? I've heard that you have to include a proviso saying that such-and-such incident happened at this location, which makes it harder to process real estate…

There was no need to specify that this room was a snake's den, but the owner would still be required to mention the fact that a person had died here in an unusual manner.

Ah, still, the owner surely didn't make this request to Gaen-san for that reason alone, but since this was a business transaction, it wouldn't be unusual if he took that simple calculation into account.

"Basically, because Alfa-san of Household A survived his hanging, the couple in Household B was able to move in without being informed. And similarly, because Bravo-san of Household B escaped her death, the family in Household C was able to move in without being informed…"

"That's right. If Alfa had lost his life, Then the tragedies that came afterwards may not have occurred at all."

It was a harsh way of putting it. But it was true that if there had been a notice about the previous resident's suicide, it would be unlikely that the couple or family would consider moving in… This may be a designer apartment, and one of the best rooms in the building, but even if they were informed that a suicide had occurred—if they were informed?

"……"

"Hm? What's the matter, Nade*kou*? You're looking down again, just like you did in the past. But you don't have any bangs, so your face isn't hidden at all, you know? Are you ashamed of yourself after your lack of understanding of humanity was thrust upon you?"

"No, that's not it… But when was my lack of understanding of humanity thrust upon me?"

Rather than being shocked at my own lack of understanding, I was more shocked that something so immense was thrust upon me without me knowing it, but putting that aside.

"I may have figured out the culprit. The instigator behind the snake's curse."

"Oho? Then, there really was a curse. And it wasn't just a trick question from Gaen-san. Then tell me, who's the culprit?"

It was the same monotone as ever, but Ononoki-chan seemed greatly interested as she interrupted, so I said,

"It was a trick question. Mm… It might even be heinous,"

in response.

"The culprit—is me."

"…Ah. The usual, I see?"

"Don't call it 'the usual'!"

008

The epilogue; or perhaps, the punch line.

The culprit was me.

However, it wasn't the usual, like it was with Black Hanekawa-san or Kako-san or Oshino Ougi-san—and it wasn't the Kuchinawa-san version either, hmmm!? And we've already gone through having a showdown with the four Nadekos, right?

But even so, the culprit was me.

More precisely, the culprit was me, you, him, her, them, and all of humanity—er, I certainly wasn't trying to delay making my point with exaggerated rhetoric… Even though tons of lives were being lost in wars across the world at this very moment, what point was there to solve the case of a single room?—was not something I was going to say.

What I did want to say was—food, clothing, and shelter were needs that were shared by all humans… Oddly enough, during the case that caused her to be kicked out of the Araragi household, Ononoki-chan had gotten the chance to reflect on the need for "clothing"… But it seemed that this case revolved around "shelter".

Though I wasn't a freeloader in my case, I was, like Ononoki-chan, being kicked out of my own home and thus taking on a specialist job out of self-interest—that is, to find a new place of residence—but that didn't mean I would settle for anywhere as long as it shielded me from the elements.

Of course I had the bare minimum requirements that I would not concede, and I even had ideals that might be dismissed as extravagant. Even if someone were to tell me to stoically settle for an eighty-year-old, 4.5-*tatami* room with no lock and no bath for the sake of my dream—and, as Ononoki-chan had harshly pointed out, communal life in a share house would be impossible for me.

Realistically.

I wasn't going to say that I was going to become a popular mangaka and live in a castle in the future, but I did have the desire to live in a cozy home—as for right now, it was unfortunate that the Sengoku household was not such a place, but that's not the point.

It would be ideal if I could reconcile such desires with my budget, but the truth I ended up only thinking, "If only the rent were lower." And even if I did find a place that miraculously met my requirements, they had already found a new tenant by the time I contacted them—stuff like that.

And like how I had hoped to find a place at a reasonable price, let's say there was someone, somewhere in this world, that thought,

“If only the rent were lower”… But after finding the perfect place, that person ended up disappointed just as I had.

But.

What if, unlike me, they didn’t give up there?

What if that person thought of a way to *make the rent lower*, and even carried out a plan to *ensure that that property was vacated?*

…Even if there were a notice of an unnatural death on that property—essentially, even if it were stigmatized—there would still be a certain number of people that wanted to live there. The reason being, with enough people choosing to avoid the stigmatized property, the owner would have no choice but to lower the rent.

In other words, *if you had a way to turn property into stigmatized property,* then even your ideal room that would normally be out of reach could have its cost lowered.

“The *jagirinawa* may have been unleashed, but this wasn’t a snake’s den—the victim had been cursed, but they weren’t actually resented. It was simply that *someone wanted this room to become a power spot.* Someone wanted an unnatural death to occur in this room.”

Someone, with the exact opposite intentions of the client, had used, of all things, the curse of the *jagirinawa—for a reason like that.*

The exterior of the building looking like a contemporary art museum wasn’t exactly to my liking, but I had to admit the interior design was very high-level, and I would be convinced if I were told that this was quite the coveted property—it would not be a surprise if there were prospective tenants that wanted to live here at any cost.

It would just be unpleasant.

And that explained the point of uncertainty about why only one person per household ended up hanged—because only one death was enough.

To give rise to a new oddity story, a witness was necessary.

Fortunately, all the attempts up until now had ended up failing… However, the curse had improved after the repeated attempts, and after three consecutive failures over the span of a few months, there was a possibility that the culprit would resort to hanging an entire family in order to increase their chances of producing a death.

If they weren’t stopped, they’d continue until someone died.

They would dispatch snakes to this room, one after another, because it wasn’t a power spot—until it became a power spot.

“Mhm. I’ve heard your reasoning, Nadekko. But regardless of whether that deduction is correct, and regardless of what this onee-san thinks about it—how do you plan on stopping this terrifying culprit who would curse people that they don’t even hate? You’ll only

be a professional if you can think that far ahead."

After I'd clumsily reported my findings, Gaen-san responded as such—but unlike my parents who would come up with yet another clear condition after I found an answer, this was a justified trial for me to undertake.

Now that I'd identified the problem, I had to propose a solution—um.

"The culprit would have to be a prospective tenant, so after Household A and Household B moved out, they would have made an inquiry to the owner, or perhaps to some real estate agency… Asking if the rent had dropped enough to make their wallet happy."

I didn't think it would be possible to pinpoint a single suspect just from that, but it should narrow the suspects down by quite a bit.

It would take a lot of time, but if they interviewed the remaining suspects one-by-one… They probably wouldn't be expecting a crime as audacious as this to be found out, so I figured they could expose themselves when subjected to an interrogation.

"Mhm, mhm. I suppose it's a start, so consider it a passing grade. I can't say you've eliminated all other reasonable possibilities, but I want you to value your confidence in the fact that not a single snake appeared in your sketchbook, so I'll give you bonus points. Congratulations. Good job."

She patted me on the head, given that I was Nadeko.[46]

I didn't really like my hair being touched, though… But even though I felt embarrassed, I didn't feel uncomfortable.

Perhaps the way she so easily gained the trust of others was what made Gaen-san a good administrator and senior.

"I'll let the client, the building owner, know. I expect it won't be long before we find the right person… But it's unlikely that that prospective client is actually the originator of the curses."

"Huh? Really?"

"The prospective tenant is only a prospective tenant, and a client just as much as the owner is—they would have outsourced this ruthless curse to a professional. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been capable of doing something so outrageous like cursing someone they didn't even resent."

"Th-then… The true mastermind is Kaiki-san… Maybe?"

"No. As you've surmised, the *jagirinawa* planted by that unworthy junior of mine was nothing but a fake—instead of trying to startle someone with a toy snake, this is more like throwing a real, venomous snake into an ordinary household, which is most likely not that con man's doing. This must be the work of someone who's the exact opposite of the specialists that relieve people of their worries—the work of Araundo, someone who fulfills people's desires."

“Araundo—”

It was a word I’d heard before, but as I tried to remember where I’d heard it before, Gaen-san continued with a renewed tone of voice.

“Everyone has their own desires, and that in itself is not something to punish. But the snake that fulfills their desires is something that must be punished—Nadekko. As promised, I’ll refer you to an apartment after you graduate… I expect I can find something to meet all of your requirements. So go ahead, desire as much as you want. I may keep my words to myself, but I don’t go back on my word.[47] However, until this case is completely resolved, I’d like for you to accompany me a little longer,”

she said.

“Will you do it? Snake extermination. I want you to help track down not the snake’s den but the snake’s headquarters, and capture the boss of the snakes.”

“…If that’s something I can do.”

Then please, let me help.

Somehow, I was able to give an instant reply—I was the one that made the request to her. I could hardly believe that assertive voice was my own, but it must have been because of what I myself thought of.

It must have been because of what I thought of myself.

Because I saw myself, of all people, in the motive of the curse, which was so self-centered and lacking regard for the welfare of others—the culprit was me.

Perhaps it was time for me to take up the challenge against Sengoku Nadeko, the one who cursed and the one who was cursed.

The challenge that the others were already facing, the one that went beyond the usual.

So I absolutely could not turn a blind eye to the boss of the snake’s headquarters—“Araundo”—who had shamelessly taken on the request of someone as unsightly as me.

“Please tell me, Gaen-san. What do I need to do?”

“Nice attitude. But don’t worry, this onee-san has no plans to overwork her adorable Nadekko. So that you can always work with a smile, I’ll just have you do some light work. First off, without asking any questions, go meet your old friend that cursed you, and rekindle your old friendship.”

“Oho.”

Wooow, so liiight! As light as performing acrobatics![48]

The reason for such a pretense was a complete mystery, but, well… I guess I should visit Kanbaru-san to borrow a costume, in the event that I’m cursed again.

Too heavy or not to hebi.[49]
To be an alive snake, or to be a dead snake!

Afterword

There are many arguments for and against the idea that the creator and his creation are separate, but if we think about it simply and logically, it is impossible for the creator and the creation to be the same, or to be in perfect agreement. Personally, I think that the statement, “The creation is but one part of the creator,” is correct. But the funny thing is, there are examples—lots of examples—where that one part surpasses the whole, and I’d like to say that’s the real thrill of creation. I suppose it would be like, “The creator is but one part of his creation”? There is no doubt that he is one of its components, but the proportions of those components and the roles they play may vary. In that case, what if the creator expresses that his creation reached fruition in a manner completely different from his original plan? One may think it equates to being a failed work, but that isn’t the case—the author may have failed, but it surely wouldn’t become a failed work. I’m sure we can solicit any number of opinions on how much the excuse “This wasn’t what I planned” can be used against a creative work, but I imagine the number of people saying that it ended up better than the original plan and the number of people saying that it ended up worse than the original plan would be about the same. Of course, whether it’s good or bad, the work is a part of the creator’s self, so he may not feel any sense of accomplishment as a result, but I suppose that point is what separates the creator from his creation. Even without parents, a child will grow.

Although this has no relation to the above discussion, this book was originally a story about Araragi-kun and Ononoki-chan going on an adventure to the demon world during the summer vacation of his first year in university. That had been the plot at the planning stage, but once I began writing and finished thusly, the contents ended up slightly different. But I am not dissatisfied in the least. Conversely, if I think about how it would’ve never ended up like this if I’d planned everything out in minute detail, then that sounds even scarier. Sengoku Nadeko’s storyline in the latter half also has Ononoki-chan as a partner, so the entire novel was full of this corpse doll as a result, which was also outside of my expectations. But, at least when it comes to me, I have never written a single novel according to my original plans. Nevertheless, it appears that my next novel will become my hundredth one. It was certainly outside of my expectations to have been able to write for this long, so I can only say that I’m truly glad that things didn’t go according to plan. With that, this book was a *tsukumogami*[50] written 100 percent as a hobby, “Amarimonogatari”, “Episode 4: Yotsugi Buddy” and “Episode 5: Yotsugi Shadow”.

As you have seen, the cover features the version of Ononoki Yotsugi-chan in her new fashion. VOFAN-san, thank you very much. Her appearance rate on the covers has inadvertently become top-class, so she's completely become a main character before I knew it, didn't she? Monster Season will now be entering its second half, so please look forward to the remaining three volumes. I hope you will follow along with my unplanned plans.

NISIOISIN

Translator's Afterword

There are often times when I revisit some of my earlier translations and think that I could've done better. Of course, feeling ashamed of my past translations is likely a sign that I've improved as a translator—but when I consider the embarrassment I feel from recalling my past memories, does that really mean I've grown as a person? On the other hand, there have been times when I've read a translation of mine and thought, "This holds up surprisingly well for something I did several years ago," so perhaps I haven't actually improved as much as I think I have. For example, instead of an upgrade, it would be a sidegrade. (At least, I hope I haven't downgraded.) In any case, if I had infinite time and resources, I'd be tempted to keep going back and editing what I've put up, but then again, if I really did have infinite time and resources, they'd be better off spent translating new works instead. With that in mind, I'd like to have the confidence to never go back and edit my earlier translations, but perhaps that isn't quite it either.

It was touched upon in the text itself, but the word "buddy" in the arc title "Yotsugi Buddy" could also be read as "body". Given that the word "body" is more commonly written as *bodi* unlike title's *badi*, and considering the partnership of Koyomi and Yotsugi being more at the forefront of the story than anyone's bodies, it seemed more appropriate to use the word "buddy", but in the end, I can't claim to know for sure the author's true intentions. Perhaps a translation should seek to be so natural that people forget it's a translation, but ironically, I'd like to keep reminding people that a translation is but another interpretation of the translator.

On behalf of the author, I would like to thank you for reading "Amarimonogatari"—and I would like to thank you for reading my translation.

Polaris

Updated January 24, 2024

Notes

[←1]
Hagoromo is written as 羽衣, which contains the kanji 羽 *hane*.

[←2]

快傑ゾロ *kaiketsu zoro*, 解決ゼロ *kaiketsu zero*.

[←3]

翼 *tsubasa* “wings”, hence the reference to the “kitty onee-chan”.

[←4]

愛車 *aisha* “beloved car”, 廃車 *haisha* “demolished car”.

[←5]

いいえ *iie* means “no”.

[←6]

不健康 *fukenkou* “unhealthy”, 肩甲骨 *kenkoukotsu* “shoulder blades”.

[←7]

鎖骨 *sakotsu* “clavicle”, 粗忽 *sokotsu* “careless”.

[←8]

The kanji for “plate” (皿) looks similar to the kanji for “blood” (血).

[←9]

From the previous lines, 取り合いっこ *toriaikko* “fighting over someone”. Here, we have 取り替えっ子 *torikaekko* “replacement child”.

[←10]

鍵 *kagi* “keys”, 限らない *kagiranai* “not necessarily”.

[←11]

余接 Yotsugi, 余念 *yonen* “other ideas”.

[←12]

事情 *jijou* “situation”, 異常 *ijou* “anomaly”.

[←13]

In the above line, 冗談 *joudan* “joke”, and then 怪談 *kaidan* “ghost story”.

[←14]

脅威 *kyoui* “threatening”, 恐怖 *kyoufu* “terrifying”.

[←15]

太もも *futomomo* “thighs”, 太い *futoi* “thick”.

[←16]

布団が吹っ飛んだ *futon ga futtonda*.

[←17]

羨望 *senbou*, “envy”.

[←18]

From the previous line, 根に持つ *ne ni motsu* “to hold a grudge”. Here, we have 音を上げる *ne o ageru* “to admit defeat”.

[←19]

無表情 *muhyoujou* “expressionless”, 無情 *mujou* “heartless”.

[←20]

量子論 *ryoushiron* “quantum theory”, 猟奇 *ryouki* “bizarre”.

[←21]

The Japanese title of Les Misérables is 噫無情 Aa Mujou “Ah, Heartless”, hence the word association.

[←22]

The previous line has 引っかかる *hikkakaru* “to weigh on one’s mind”. Here, we have 引っかき傷 *hikkaki kizu* “scratch mark”.

[←23]

探偵 *tantei* “detective”, 密偵 *mittei* “spy”.

[←24]

Ononoki says 手加減は苦手 “not good at holding back” and then says 指加減は苦指, which is the same phrase but with 手 (the kanji for “hand”) replaced with 指 (the kanji for “finger”).

[←25]

さっぱり *sappari* can mean both “refreshing” and “not at all”.

[←26]

巧妙 *koumyou* “clever”, 怪我の功名 *kega no koumyou* “lucky break”, 光明 *koumyou* “ray of light”.

[←27]

人形 *ningyou* “doll” is made up of the kanji for 人 *hito* “human” and 形 *katachi* “form”.

[←28]

膝を打つ *hiza wo utsu* “to slap one’s knee (when impressed)”, 膝を撃ち抜く *hiza wo uchinuku* “to shoot the knee”.

[←29]

式神 *shikigami* contains 神 *kami* “god”, 使い魔 *tsukaima* “familiar” contains 魔 *ma* “demon”.

[←30]

毛色 *keiro* “disposition”, 色 *iro* “color”.

[←31]

驚嘆 *kyoutan* “amazement”, 恐怖 *kyoufu* “fear”.

[←32]

心血 *shinketsu* “heart and soul”, 血肉 *ketsuniku* “flesh and blood”.

[←33]

目玉 *medama* can mean both “centerpiece” and “eyeball”.

[←34]

眼鏡 *megane* “judgment”, 目がねー *me ga nee* “The eyes, huh”.

[←35]

ギャグ *gyagu* “gag”, ギャラ *gyara* “fee”.

[←36]

冷えていない *hieteinai* “not chilly”, 言えていない *ieteinai* “not saying it”.

[←37]

癖 *kuse* “habit”, 癖に *kuse ni* “in spite of”.

[←38]

なめされた *namesareta* “tanned”, なめる *nameru* “to lick”.

[←39]

Up until now, Araragi has always used お前 *omae*, a less polite form of “you”, when talking to Hanekawa. Here, Hanekawa asks Araragi to stop using *omae*.

[←40]

Araragi amends his usage of お前 omae to あなた anata, a more polite form of “you”.

[←41]

Here, Hanekawa mentions her given name 翼 “Tsubasa” but reads it as “Tasuku”, which is an alternative name reading for the kanji. Though as “Tsubasa” the name usually means “wings”, reading it as “Tasuku” gives it a second meaning of “to help”.

[←42]

Nadeko mistakenly says 言葉のあら *kotoba no ara* instead of 言葉の綾 *kotoba no aya*, or “figure of speech”. Yotsugi’s response uses the word あら探し *arasagashi* “fault finding”, which could also be read as “finding *ara*“. You might be able to tell from the conversation why “*ara*” is on Nadeko’s brain.

[←43]

Nadeko uses two different words for “training” here, but the second one, 修行 shugyou, can have religious connotations (like ascetic training), which may be more appropriate for her line of work.

[←44]

Nadeko contrasts 落命 *rakumei* “losing one’s life” with 吊命, which is likely a pun on 長命 *choumei* “long life”. However, the kanji used for chou is 吊, for “hanging”.

[←45]

巻きつく *makitsuku* “to wind around”, 撒き餌 *makie* “groundbait”.

[←46]

撫でる naderu means “to pat”, and shares kanji with 撫子 Nadeko.

[←47]

Gaen contrasts 一家言 “personal opinion” with 二言 “double-dealing”. The kanji is literally “one (family) word” and “two words”, respectively.

[←48]

Gaen calls it 軽作業 “light work”, which shares kanji with 軽業 “acrobatics”. Contrasting acrobatics to light work is a bit subtle in English, but it’s more apparent in Japanese as 軽業 has another meaning of “risky undertaking”.

[←49]

蛇 hebi means “snake”. This line is written in (mostly) English, punning on hebi, heavy, and of course, Hamlet’s “To be or not to be”.

[←50]

Written as 九十九神 lit. “99 gods” instead of the usual 付喪神.